

Emily the Criminal with Aubrey Plaza: Feeling the economic pinch, a woman embraces illegality

David Walsh
6 June 2024

Emily the Criminal, featuring Aubrey Plaza, is a 2022 film about a woman in Los Angeles, saddled with debt, who becomes involved in a credit card fraud scheme, with serious consequences. Written and directed by John Patton Ford, it is available on Netflix.

In an opening scene, Emily Benetto (Plaza), a would-be artist, who works delivering food for low pay, undergoes an interview for a better position. The office manager-interviewer, after first falsely claiming the company has not done a background check, proceeds to confront Emily with a conviction for “aggravated assault” some years earlier. She loses her temper, “Why would you trick somebody like that? ... And you asked me why I want this job, because I got \$70,000 of student debt. There’s your f—— answer right there.”

Effectively prevented from obtaining a better position, Emily is tipped off by a fellow employee about a means of earning \$200 in an hour as a “dummy shopper.” After work that same day, she makes a phone call in regard to a \$400 payment she made on her loans: “It was applied to my interest? Sorry. How much interest is being added a month?”

The following afternoon, along with a dozen or so others, mostly young people, Emily listens to Youcef (Theo Rossi) explain the nature of the illegal operation. As “dummy shoppers,” Emily and the rest, using fake credit cards and false identification, will purchase relatively expensive items, such as flat-screen televisions, and hand them over to the organizers.

After certain successes, Emily graduates to attempting to obtain a car in the same manner (for which she is to be paid \$2,000). The ruse is seen through at the last minute, and she is injured in a physical confrontation, although she manages to get away with the vehicle.

Emily and Youcef become closer. He gives her the equipment to make her own cards, and she enthusiastically plunges into the fraudulent activity, which sometimes puts her at risk. Emily demonstrates, however, taser in hand, that she is no pushover.

She and Youcef exchange confidences. Youcef’s ambition is to buy and renovate a small apartment building. What would Emily do, he wonders, if she had some money—pay her loan back?

-Yeah, I would definitely do that first.

-What about your art? Would you do your art?

-Yeah, I would make art for sure. I would paint. I love painting. It makes me happy.

-What else?

-I mean, I don’t know. I just want to be free, you know? I just want to be able to experience things. I want to travel. I want to live in another country for a while.

Youcef introduces Emily to his Lebanese-born mother. The latter asks the younger woman what she wants to do in life. “I’m not sure yet.” “You will figure out your gift ... Maybe, Emily the teacher. Emily the mother. Emily the something.” Perhaps Emily the criminal?

In fact, Emily’s over-eagerness helps precipitate her and Youcef’s downfall. Youcef’s cousin and partner in crime Khalili (Jonathan Avigori) informs the pair that Emily has broken a cardinal rule: “shopping” at the same store twice in one week, prompting the retailer to post security footage of her online.

At the same time, economic imperatives keep her locked into the increasingly dangerous activities. In a telling scene, the head of an ad agency (Gina Gershon) interviews Emily for an “internship” at her firm. “Is that a paid position?” Emily asks. “Not at first,” she is told. “The way it works is the first five or six months, you get to know the business and if you do a great job, then I’d love to discuss it with you.”

That ultimately prompts this exchange between Emily and her prospective boss:

-What I don’t understand is how you feel so comfortable asking someone to work without pay.

-You know, when I was your age, they told me all I could be was a secretary.

-Okay. But secretaries get paid.

-That’s not the point.

-Well, when you were my age, did you have \$60,000 in

debt?

-How about this? When I was your age, I was the only woman in a room full of men.

-But you had a job.

-Okay. You know-

-You were getting paid. Am I wrong?

Inevitably, in any case, the criminals fall out, violence ensues and Emily barely escapes with her life.

There are sharply observed elements to *Emily the Criminal*. The emphasis on Emily's crushing debt-load and the apparently widespread economic desperation, which channels a steady stream of willing humanity toward the crime ring, is healthy and welcome. Emily is hemmed in on every side. When her supervisor at the food delivery service cuts her hours as punishment for an unexplained absence, and Emily complains, he taunts her:

I'm sorry, are you an employee? No, you're an independent contractor. So quit talking like you've got rights and go back to work. ... Call your shop steward then. All right? You got a union shop steward, call them, if not go back to work.

At the same time, the film possesses murky, ambiguous aspects, which weaken it. Plaza and Rossi are both very effective and convincing performers, and the intensity and tension are palpable, but Plaza seems determined to prove Emily's toughness and hardness at every point, for reasons that remain unclear. In a brief scene prior to the violent denouement, we learn that her assault conviction came from an attack on "a guy I was dating ... we fought all the time." Her mistake, she goes on to explain, was that "I didn't go far enough. I didn't really scare him. You know, 'cause if I had, he would've never called the police." So, is Emily psychologically unstable, damaged to the extent that she happily embraces the "excitement" and aggression of her criminal life? What's the point of this? Is *Emily the Criminal* an ironic title, as one first expects (and hopes) it to be, or not?

Writer-director Ford, who introduces intriguing social facts into his work, seems unclear himself about the driving forces in the drama.

In one interview, he foolishly suggests that *Emily the Criminal* is "ultimately a character study; it's about someone figuring out what they're good at, and what they like to do and what they'll probably continue doing. It's a coming-of-age story less than a thriller."

Again, the criminality here has to be seen in perspective. America is a country governed by warmongers and murderers, representing a corporate financial oligarchy that has looted

trillions from the economy and the working class. The ruling elite has allowed vast numbers to die in a preventable pandemic, intervened directly in the Middle East and Central Asia, leading to more than 1 million deaths, and financed and incited proxy wars in Ukraine and Gaza with incalculable human suffering.

A filmmaker needn't introduce those harsh truths directly into his or her work, but an artist with social understanding farther forward in his or her consciousness, more closely "at one" with his or her epoch, would proceed in a more urgent and concentrated manner.

Ford seems to have arrived at the strongest points partially by accident, somewhat to his own surprise. He possesses a sufficiently sensitive antenna to be aware of pressing social circumstances, but only half-registers or half-understands them.

In a revealing comment, Ford explained to an interviewer from awardsdaily.com that issues like the gig economy and student loan debt "were never top priority. Those were things I just took from my own life and that I understood and felt true, you know?"

It was only after making the movie, he added, "did I realize how important those social issues are to many audiences. People latched onto that and focused on that in a way that I did not fully expect." He continued: "If you go online and read audience reviews, like every single review is about student loans or internships, and the economy. It's very clear that people were ready to talk about those things." Indeed!

In part because the filmmakers have not made up their minds to produce sharp social criticism, they end up taking the line of least resistance, and *Emily the Criminal*, somewhat predictably, becomes a fairly ordinary "crime thriller" in its final half hour. American filmmakers can do that sort of thing blindfolded; they find it more difficult to achieve genuine psychological and social richness. The film doesn't go off the rails as disastrously as *Breaking Bad*, which had a similarly promising premise, it simply runs out of steam ... and ideas.

In May 2024, the media reported that Legendary Television had acquired the rights to adapt *Emily the Criminal* as a television series, although without Plaza. One fears that the weakest sides of the film will be taken over and made the center of such a series.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact