

Stream It or Skip It: ‘Emily the Criminal’

By Rebecca Carlyle | Last modified: August 28, 2023



As a huge Aubrey Plaza fan and avid thriller film viewer, I was ecstatic to see “Emily the Criminal” when it [debuted on Netflix](#) on Dec. 7, 2022, going so far as to note the date in my planner. The film centers on Emily (Aubrey Plaza), an underemployed artist struggling under a mountain of college loan debt. Working at an LA catering company is barely paying the bills, so when she gets wind of a not-so-legal way to make an extra \$200 for an hour of her time, she bites.

What starts as a one-time gig, quickly escalates into her main source of income. Her new mentor, Youcef (Theo Rossi), teaches her how to become a dummy shopper. Her first act in this role is to purchase a TV using a fake credit card so it could be sold later on the street. When this first job goes smoothly she signs on for another, bigger job.



After attempting a few jobs and having one go terribly wrong where she ends up with a bloody nose, Emily keeps her hopes up for a legal job. Her best friend from high school, Liz (Megalyne Echikunwoke), has promised to help Emily get a graphic design job at the marketing firm she works at. However, as time goes on, she continually lets Emily down while using her as a pet sitter for her dog when she’s out of town. Even when Emily does finally get a job interview, it’s for an unpaid internship – perfect for paying off those loans, right?

Struggling to keep her disappointment under control, Emily throws herself back into the criminal lifestyle. Youcef helps her create her own fake credit cards so she doesn’t have to rely on him for jobs anymore. Not only is she now acting as a dummy buyer, she’s also selling on her own as well. All along the way, Youcef feeds her tips and tricks such as “Don’t shop at the same store twice in a week.”



Of course, there has to be a little bit of a short-lived romance involved. Youcef and Emily begin seeing each other in secret, hiding it from Youcef’s boss who happens to also be his cousin. They share their hopes and dreams, both wanting to be legit one day and leaving their lives of credit card fraud in the past. But it’s not as simple as they hoped. Youcef plans to buy an apartment building from his cousin once construction is done so he can be a landlord. Emily dreams of sketching full time.

The two are an odd pair but somehow work together. For a while, things are good; Youcef even takes Emily to meet his mother. Then everything starts going downhill and fast. She breaks the first rule and dummy shops at the same store twice. Then she breaks the second rule: “Never conduct business at your home.” Everything spirals and Emily struggles to gain control of the situations and her life, which hardens her. Finally, Youcef’s cousin betrays him and sells the apartment to someone else.



Youcef’s and Emily’s anger at their individual issues builds together in a toxic way, and they wind up deciding to rob Youcef’s cousin. Of course, neither of them are criminal masterminds so this goes awry as well. The cousin has outmaneuvered them by moving his stash of merchandise and cleaning out his bank account. Youcef is ready to give up, but Emily is enraged and comes up with a plan.

Their final attempt to outwit and attack the cousin gets violent, and we finally learn why Emily has an aggravated assault on her criminal record. She states to Youcef that she regrets not going far enough to scare her ex-boyfriend and that if she had stood up for herself and really made him bleed, he wouldn’t have called the cops. This explains a lot about Emily’s moral compass that, so far, has seemed only askew. Emily is akin to a rabid animal – when backed into a corner she doesn’t cower. Instead, she lashes out.



From the very beginning, I felt bad for Emily. She was working a dead-end job, crippled by debt, and unable to acquire a career job because of her criminal record (the explanation, of which, is not revealed till later). When granted the opportunity for a little extra cash so that she can pay off more than just the accruing interest on her college loans, I can understand why. Her motivations seem so clear early on. But time and time again, she makes bad choices, like breaking the rules. In time, my sympathy for her wanes.

However, the acting in this movie is wonderful. Aubrey Plaza ditches her usual deadpan demeanor in favor of an animalistic artist who I desperately wanted things to work out for. This says a lot about her performance! However, the movie itself feels drawn out and slow. I kept waiting for something to happen. When anything exciting did happen, I found myself thinking, “That’s it?” Even the big finale with Emily and Youcef going after the cousin somehow fell flat.

The filmography style and editing were well done and really fit Emily’s personality and the indie style of the movie. The actors and editors did great, so where’s the loose screw? I believe the writing is what’s at fault. The first two-thirds of the film flows nicely as we watch Emily harden into the final criminal she becomes. The last third of the film speeds up suddenly as she unravels, and it almost seems like we missed something.

While this wasn’t my least favorite movie of the year, it wasn’t my favorite either. I’m honestly torn about this movie. I know if I hadn’t watched it, I would’ve kept wondering about it, especially since I wanted to see Aubrey play this character. However, after having seen it, I feel unsatisfied with the ending and a bit let down. It was anticlimactic; it turns out I could’ve gone without watching it after all.

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