Emily the Criminal, 2022

“You’re a very bad influence.”

Major Credits

Writer and Director: John Patton Ford
Cinematographer: Jeff Meerman
Cast: Aubrey Plaza (Emily Benetto), Theo Rossi (Yousef), Gina Gershon (Alice)

Background

Made on a small $3 million budget, shot in three weeks on location in Los Angeles, and first screened at the Sundance festival, Emily the film, like Emily at its outset, has yet to earn back its cost, although critics generally praised it. The first-time director, John Patton Ford, drew on his own experience of being burdened by student loan debt when writing the script. Aubrey Plaza, who was primarily known for her work in comedy (Parks and Recreation), is in every scene and garnered universal praise for her performance. She also co-produced the film. Gena Gershon, who once was a budding Hollywood star (Bound), appears in a compelling cameo role.

Cinematic Qualities

1. As the title clearly indicates, Emily the Criminal is a genre movie, inviting you to see it within the conventions of the crime thriller. The plot moves quickly through an escalating series of dangerous acts perpetrated by a compelling protagonist. The script has a clear structure detailing Emily’s rise from petty collaborator to mastermind, with two job interviews providing narrative unity and an extended sequence in the middle defining Emily’s fitness for the job. The film itself is a kind of “good job,” efficiently completed in 93 minutes.
2. The camera work—hand-held tracking shots, many from behind the character—working class milieu, and industrial settings are reminiscent of the Dardenne brothers’ films. The jittery, naturally lit scenes impart an aura of realism rather than artistic stylization.

Questions for Discussion

1. As in the typical thriller, the movie’s initial appeal lies in the revelation of the details of “dummy shopping,” but the ultimate interest of the film is the character of its protagonist. As Alison Willmore as noted, “Emily may be sympathetic in her desperation, but she’s not nice” (Vulture). She is, in fact, an archetypal anti-hero. Note the extenuating social circumstances that help to explain her choices. What admirable personal qualities does she display? What essential qualities does she demonstrate as a criminal?
2. A couple of critics notice the film’s aspiration to the level of the Dardenne brothers’ “social incisiveness” and “responsible realism” but always disparagingly. Re-consider the levels of social criticism Patton Ford suggests within the crime genre. If he does not exonerate Emily, does he at least try to explain her?
3. The film’s abrupt denouement, which disappointed some reviewers, might remind older audiences of Lawrence Kasdan’s Body Heat (1981). What is your response to this short closing scene?
4. In some respects, Emily the Criminal follows the stylistic tropes of the typical action movie: quick cuts, rock music, night scenes. Consider the typical elements it avoids. How does the film try to transcend the limits of its own self-consciously adopted genre?