

1. A masterpiece of screenwriting This is Tarantino's masterpiece, there's no other way to say it. It has arguably one of the smartest scripts I've ever seen. The story, which is non-linear, is so well constructed it takes several viewings to grasp it all. The movie doesn't seem to be about any specific thing, but there is a subtle hint of redemption as a central theme. The characters and performances in this movie are practically perfect. This is still one of the best performances I've seen from Sam Jackson, and it's an outrage he didn't win an Oscar. Each scene has its own unique flavour and charm, every segment has its own arc while also tying into the main plot. The comedy is great, the serious moments are great, every word of dialogue is exciting despite seemingly not having any reason to exist. This movie is just such a great time, and I recommend it to everyone who loves movies. I cannot think of a single genuine flaw with it, and it will remain one of my favorite movies for a long time.

2. The masterpiece without a message One of the early scenes in "Pulp Fiction" features two hit-men discussing what a Big Mac is called in other countries. Their dialogue is witty and entertaining, and it's also disarming, because it makes these two thugs seem all too normal. If you didn't know better, you might assume these were regular guys having chit-chat on their way to work. Other than the comic payoff at the end of the scene, in which they use parts of this conversation to taunt their victims, their talk has no relevance to anything in the film, or to anything else, for that matter. Yet without such scenes, "Pulp Fiction" wouldn't be "Pulp Fiction." I get the sense that Tarantino put into the film whatever struck his fancy, and somehow the final product is not only coherent but wonderfully textured. It's no wonder that fans spend so much time debating what was in the suitcase, reading far more into the story than Tarantino probably intended. The film is so intricately structured, with so many astonishing details, many of which you won't pick up on the first viewing, that it seems to cry out for some deeper explanation. But there is no deeper explanation. "Pulp Fiction," is, as the title indicates, purely an exercise in technique and style, albeit a brilliant and layered one. Containing numerous references to other films, it is like a great work of abstract art, or "art about art." It has all the characteristics we associate with great movies: fine writing, first-rate acting, unforgettable characters, and one of the most well-constructed narratives I've ever seen in a film. But to what end? The self-contained story does not seem to have bearing on anything but itself. The movie becomes a bit easier to understand once you realize that it's essentially a black comedy dressed up as a crime drama. Each of the three main story threads begins with a situation that could easily form the subplot of any standard gangster movie. But something always goes wrong, some small unexpected accident that causes the whole situation to come tumbling down, leading the increasingly desperate characters to absurd measures. Tarantino's originality stems from his ability to focus on small details and follow them where they lead, even if they move the story away from conventional plot developments. Perhaps no screenplay has ever found a better use for digressions. Indeed, the whole film seems to consist of digressions. No character ever says anything in a simple, straightforward manner. Jules could have simply told Yolanda, "Be cool and no one's going to get hurt," which is just the type of line you'd find in a generic, run-of-the-mill action flick. Instead, he goes off on a tangent about what Fonzie is like. Tarantino savors every word of his characters, finding a potential wisecrack in every statement and infusing the dialogue with clever pop culture references. But the lines aren't just witty; they are full of intelligent observations about human behavior. Think of Mia's statement to Vincent, "That's when you know you've found somebody special: when you can just shut the f--- up for a minute and comfortably enjoy the silence." What is the movie's purpose exactly? I'm not sure, but it does deal a lot with the theme of power. Marsellus is the sort of character who looms over the entire film while being invisible most of the time. The whole point of the big date sequence, which happens to be my favorite section of the film, is the power that Marsellus has over his men without even being present. This power is what gets Vincent to act in ways you would not ordinarily expect from a dumb, stoned gangster faced with an attractive woman whose husband has gone away. The power theme also helps explain one of the more controversial aspects of the film, its liberal use of the N-word. In this film, the word isn't just used as an epithet to describe blacks: Jules, for instance, at one point applies the term to Vincent. It has more to do with power than with race. The powerful characters utter the word to express their dominance over weaker characters. Most of these gangsters are not racist in practice. Indeed, they are intermingled racially, and have achieved a level of equality that surpasses the habits of many law-abiding citizens in our society. They resort to racial epithets because it's a patter that establishes their separateness from the non-criminal world. There's a nice moral progression to the stories. We presume that Vincent hesitates to sleep with Mia out of fear rather than loyalty. Later, Butch's act of heroism could be motivated by honor, but we're never sure. The film ends, however, with Jules making a clear moral choice. Thus, the movie seems to be exploring whether violent outlaws can act other than for self-preservation. Still, it's hard to find much of a larger meaning tying together these eccentric set of stories. None of the stories are really "about" anything. They certainly are not about hit-men pontificating about burgers. Nor is the film really a satire or a farce, although it contains elements of both. At times, it feels like a tale that didn't need to be told, but for whatever reason this movie tells it and does a better job than most films of its kind, or of any other kind.