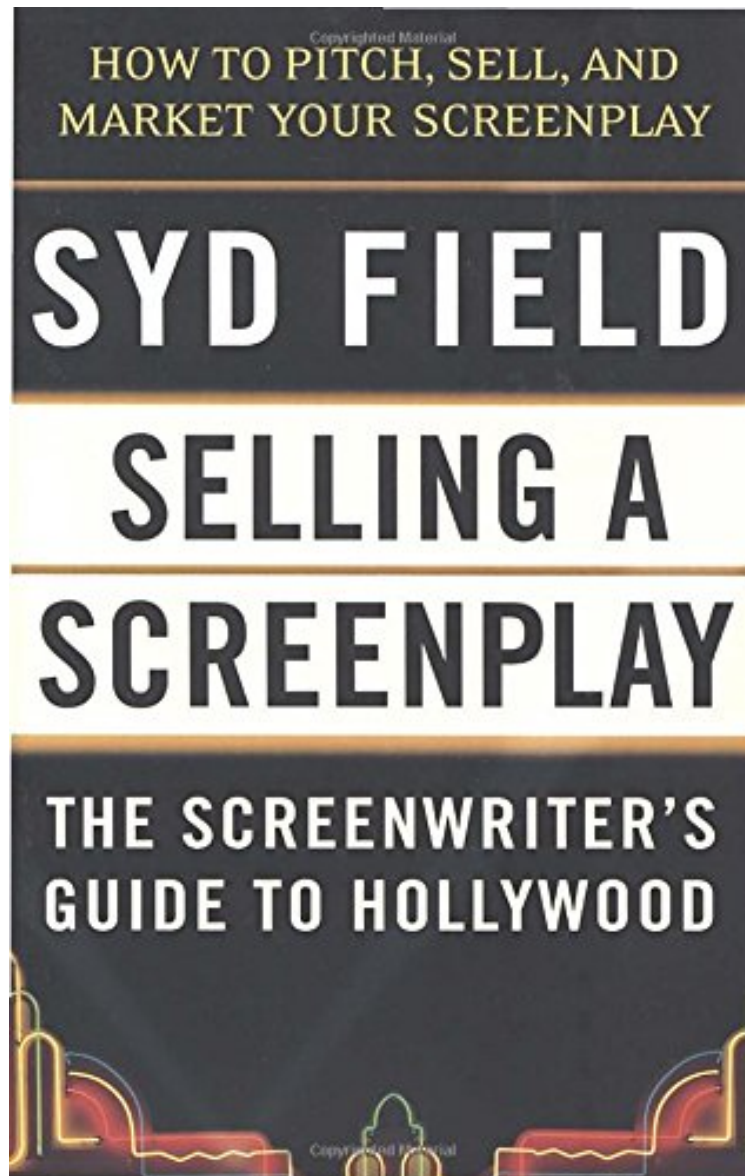


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Selling a Screenplay: The Screenwriter's Guide to Hollywood

Syd Field

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Syd Field : Selling a Screenplay: The Screenwriter's Guide to Hollywood before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Selling a Screenplay: The Screenwriter's Guide to Hollywood:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This should have been called something like, "The Hollywood working model for screenwriters" by Syd Field By E. M. Hobo Don't get me wrong, this was a hell of a lot of fun

reading it, and everything that's in there is actually true. But what it teaches you, is that Hollywood is really just a business and there's no surefire way of selling your screenplay. If you want a proper guide on how to sell something, buy Robert W. Bly's book "The Copywriting Handbook". If you want to know more about the organizational model of Hollywood, buy Syd Field's book. Just don't expect it to teach you how to actually sell the damned thing. In the end, it really is the screenplay that sells itself, based on supply and demand. It's a market, and you as a writer are nowadays vastly outnumbered. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Doesn't deliver what the cover promises By Barbie Taylor "Selling a screenplay" doesn't deliver on its title and is quite dated. While the content is a fairly interesting read, Syd is mostly name dropping and telling his own personal stories of how he got to work on various projects. He's fond of telling us what restaurant he met various big shots in, but really does not deliver any "how to" information. The dollar figures he cites must be way out of date. He often makes references to "upcoming movies" that are now distant memories. The book is good for a quick skim and does give you a sense of how the industry works, but it certainly doesn't do deliver what it's cover promises: "how to pitch, sell, and market your screenplay." 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By storyacademy He is just the best - very insightful and it's a great support - the Master's voice!

- Breaks Down the Business of Screenwriting - Explains What the Buyer Looks For - Shows You What to Do to Get in the Door - Tackles the Pitching Process - Provides Personal Insights from Famous Screenwriters Everybody has a story to tell. Everybody wants to write the great American screenplay. But what do you do after it's written? How do you sell it? Studio honchos. Development Executives. Independent Producers. What do they want? Do you need an agent or manager to get it into production? Selling a screenplay can mean earning \$250,000 or more, so competition is fierce. Syd Field gives you an insiders look at the movie and TV industry, packed with essential tips from the pros. Selling a Screenplay is a must-have guide for every screenwriter, filled with frank real-life advice from Hollywood's most powerful deal makers and most celebrated screenwriters. They all started somewhere.

About the Author Syd Field is the internationally acclaimed screenwriter, producer, teacher, lecturer, and author of the bestselling books Screenplay, Selling a Screenplay, The Screenwriters Workbook, Four Screenplays, and The Screenwriters Problem Solver. Published in 1982, Screenplay has been translated into seventeen languages and is used in more than 350 colleges and universities across the country. At present he is creative consultant to the governments of Mexico, Argentina, Austria, and Brazil, and has been a script consultant for Roland Jaffes film production company, 20th Century Fox, the Disney Studios, and Tri-Star Pictures. He lives in Beverly Hills, California. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. THE MARKET The market potential for the screenwriter is enormous. But what is the market? How do you describe it, define it, articulate it? That was a question I kept asking myself over and over again. In my screenwriting experience, I had never explored the market, had never taken the time to find out what the parameters were and how they effected the writer. I had some notions about the market, yes, but nothing else. The only thing I had, really, was the question, What is the market for the screenwriter today? The market is a vague and nebulous term. You can talk to ten different people and get ten different answers. A producer views a script differently than an agent; an agent views it differently than a studio executive; a studio executive views it differently than a reader; the reader views it differently than an independent producer; an independent producer views it differently than a marketing executive; a marketing executive views it differently than a person in development. And so on. So I went to a friend of mine, Stan Corwin, an independent producer and publisher, who with his partner found a novel titled ". . . And Ladies of the Club" and through sheer marketing strategy catapulted it onto the New York Times best-seller list as the number-one best seller for over a year. If anyone knows what the market is, I thought to myself, it would be Stan, now president of Tudor Communications, a national paperback and film development company. So, we sat down and talked, and during the course of the conversation I slipped in The Question: What is the market? "For what?" he replied. I looked at him, taken aback. "An original screenplay," I replied. He looked at me for a moment. Then, "What kind of screenplay?" he asked guardedly. I took a deep breath and shifted into my most confident, optimistic attitude. I didn't know what to say. What kind of screenplay would I like to write, I wondered, and immediately thought of The Last Emperor. "A period action-adventure," I said. "That's a tough one." "Why?" He explained that in today's movie market a big-budget, period screenplay is a very difficult sale. What about a contemporary script, a comedy, or action-adventure? I asked. The first thing you have to do, he said, is see if there are any buyers interested in the material. "Who are the buyers?" He then gave me a thumbnail sketch of the marketplace for film and television. Most feature films, he told me, are produced or distributed by the eight major studios: Twentieth Century Fox, Disney, Paramount, Universal, MGM, UA, and Columbia (which has since merged with Tri-Star). Then there are the many independent production companies that supply the studio with product: Amblin, David Geffen, Weintraub Entertainment, Don Simpson/Jerry Bruckheimer Productions, Carolco, Cannon, Hemdale, Kings Road, Lorimar, Guber-Peters, and many, many more. These are some of the buyers and the producers of films. In television, the buyers are the three networks, ABC, CBS, NBC, now joined by Fox Broadcasting, and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). At the present time the market is proliferating, and cable TV is emerging as a major market; video

companies like Vestron, HBO, Showtime, Lorimar, and Prism are becoming the suppliers of product, and they are starting to initiate their own projects rather than buying or renting them from the studios. Today, to intelligently discuss the marketplace, you've got to understand that there are many different combinations that can get a movie made. You can create your own, just like creating your own omelet in a restaurant. For example, a producer could buy or option a screenplay, and then generate a combination of financing from Paramount, a studio, Hemdale, an independent production company, and Vestron, a cable TV company; then he could presell the project in Europe so that by the first day of principal photography the production costs of the film are covered. That's the way they did *Platoon*. In other words the market is a living, breathing entity that reflects the time and economic conditions of the industry and, of course, the country. It changes constantly. The market is not just one thing, it's many things, and if you're looking to expand your awareness of what the market is, you can't be limited by what you don't know. At the present time the marketplace is more sophisticated than it ever was. You can walk into an agent's office, whether it be the William Morris Agency, ICM, CAA, or Triad, and the tables and shelves are lined from floor to ceiling with screenplays, galleys, and books from New York publishers. That's what you're competing against if you're trying to sell the screenplay you hold in your hand. Last year, remember, more than 40,000 screenplays were registered at the Writers Guild of America and less than 120 movies were made. How do you deal with that? How do you go about trying to get your screenplay read, either by an agent for representation, or by a studio or a producer, to get it made? Everybody in Hollywood, I began to see, was a buyer and a seller. I thought about that for a while. Then I remembered something I'd read in a Kurt Vonnegut novel: when you're trying to find the answer to a question, the answer is in the question. Is that true? If the answer is found in the question, how does it relate to the market and the selling of the screenplay? And then one day, while riding my bike, it dawned on me that when you write a script you create the marketplace. Who you present your material to, and how you present it, is almost as important as the screenplay itself. That would certainly explain why so many terrible movies get made. When you have a script you want to put into the marketplace you've got to have some kind of a plan, a strategy; your primary goal is to get somebody to respond to your material. Don't just write a letter and start sending your script all over town and hope that somebody's going to be interested. It doesn't work that way. To get somebody to read your script with any degree of interest or enthusiasm, you've got to find out who might be interested in what you've written. Here's an exercise that may possibly define a market for your screenplay. Take a sheet of paper and make four columns. The first column is for agents you want to represent your work. That's assuming, of course, that you don't have an agent. The second column is for casting the major roles. Who's the best actor or actress for the part? Write it down. Who else? Write it down. Do as many as you can. The third column is a list of possible directors or filmmakers you think would do this kind of material. The fourth column is a list of people you know in the industry. Everybody knows somebody. When you start thinking about who you know in the industry start jotting down names, and before you know it, you'll find somebody--a friend, relative, lover--who knows somebody who knows somebody. You'll end up with twenty or thirty names of people who might be interested in your screenplay. If you want to get an agent to represent your work, make a list of the agents. You can get a complete list from the Writers Guild of America West, Inc., 8955 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90048, (213) 501-2000. They'll send you a list of authorized agents, some of whom, as indicated, are willing to read unsolicited screenplays. Make a list of ten agents, then call or write, telling them you've written a screenplay and asking if they would be interested in reading it. If you write, you might include a one- or two-sentence story line, but no more. I would recommend calling and talking to the secretary. A secretary can be your best friend. If the agent is not interested in reading your material, ask if they can recommend anybody. This is how you start compiling your list of agents. Most of them will say no. Keep trying. When you find an agent who is willing to read your script, submit it and then wait four to six weeks. If you do not get a reply by then, call and ask if they received the screenplay. If they have, ask if there's a good time for you to call, say in a couple of weeks. Call in a couple of weeks. Agents, like other people, respond to passion and persistence, but not to annoyance. You can send the screenplay to as many agents as you like. You should be so lucky that they all like your material. People sometimes talk about the mystique of the agent. There is no mystique. An agent should serve you the same way your stockbroker, real estate agent, or insurance agent serves you. One of my students, after writing a screenplay in my screenwriting workshop, spent five months trying to find an agent to represent it. Seventeen agents said no before she found one to say yes. That agent sold the script within six weeks--for \$250,000. Sometimes it's easier to get a response from a producer or production company than it is from an agent. Most companies require you to sign a release, stating you are submitting this material and that you release the company from all liability if a movie similar in story and theme ever gets made. Some companies, like Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, will not read any unsolicited material with or without a release. Determine the parameters of your market and make your screenplay submission an event. I remember a conversation I had with Tony Bill, coproducer of *The Sting* (David Ward) and *Taxi Driver* (Paul Schrader), director of *My Bodyguard* (Alan Ormsby) and *Five Corners* (John Patrick Shanley), and a well-known actor. He told me about a man who sent him a screenplay. Tony was in his office one day when he was called to the front lobby. When he arrived he found an elegantly attired chauffeur waiting for him holding a large gift-wrapped box. He gave it to Tony, then left. When he opened the box, he found another box inside. He opened that one, and inside was a note on a silver tray: "It arrives on

Thursday."This was on a Monday.On Tuesday the chauffeur arrived with another gift-wrapped box, and the note inside read "Thursday's the day."On Wednesday the same thing happened.Thursday arrived. By this time everybody in the office was curious. Around noon an armored car pulled up and the chauffeur stepped out, picked up a package, and walked inside. When he arrived, he placed on an embroidered maroon pillow a ten-by-thirteen envelope and presented it to Tony, who took it and opened it.Guess what was inside? A script, of course. A covering letter proclaimed that this screenplay was exactly what the movie industry was looking for, a story that would appeal to a massive audience, and that Tony was absolutely the perfect filmmaker for it. Tony Bill couldn't say no. He had to read the screenplay. You can't ask for more than that.The script either stands or falls on its own. In this case the script wasn't very good; the script was a C, the delivery an A+. But what imagination and ingenuity the writer had in presenting his material! That's class.To get a broader perspective, I decided to interview a number of industry professionals whose job it is to know the market. I talked to a studio executive, an independent producer, an executive for an independent production company, a screenwriter who used to be an agent, a director of marketing, and a reader.I really didn't know what I was looking for, or what I was going to find out; all I knew is that I wanted to ask a basic question: what is the market for the screenwriter today?"Anything an audience wants to see," says Sidney Ganis, now president of production at Paramount Pictures, and formerly head of worldwide marketing for George Lucas. In other words, there's a market for everything. Ganis, responsible for the marketing of Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi, and more, is in my opinion the sharpest marketing expert in the business. Since he's been at Paramount, he's worked on the marketing campaigns of such movies as Beverly Hills Cop II (Larry Ferguson and Warren Skaaren), Top Gun (Jim Cash and Jack Epps, Jr.), and Fatal Attraction. Everybody's looking for product. You'll find old TV shows, live comedy, sporting events, anything that's ever been filmed to be a potential subject. It's almost like the book business was fifty years ago.Everybody I interviewed agreed on one thing: before the writer even attempts to write a screenplay, he or she must research the market to find out if anybody is doing anything similar, or if anybody has any scripts in development along the same lines. Many of my students spend more than six months writing a screenplay only to learn that a movie with a similar idea is just about to be released. Doing some simple research before you sit down to write makes all the sense in the world. Why spend six months to a year writing a screenplay that has no chance of being sold because something just like it is in the works?Take responsibility for defining the market. You've got to know who's doing what for which studio. You can find out very simply, by reading the trade papers, Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. Every Tuesday a production chart lists all films currently before the cameras. If you need to know what the story line is, try calling the production office at the studio. Talk to anyone who will talk to you; as mentioned, secretaries are wonderful. They won't necessarily tell you the story line or answer all your questions, but you could tell them you're thinking of writing a story about such and such and ask if it is close to what they're doing.Before you begin, you must determine the market for yourself.A student of mine--an actress who came to me to write a mystery thriller--completed a first words-on-paper draft and rewrite during the course of three workshop sessions. She's a good writer; the story was well constructed and rich in character. When it was complete, I sent the material to a production executive I thought might be interested. She liked it but had to pass, as the star she worked for had just finished a detective story.My student then asked if I could help her get an agent. So I called a few, who read it and agreed it was good, well-written material that showed a lot of potential. But they passed. That's show biz.Now my student calls and wants me to tell her what to do. I don't have the time anymore. I did what I could. Rather than determine the market for herself, she wants me to guide her.She's got to read the trades, call the agents, call the production companies, call the agents of the actors she thinks are right for the parts, call the people she knows in the industry; in other words, she's got to determine if there's a market for her script.It only takes one person to like it. Just one.Right now is a wonderful time for the writer of the original screenplay. Everybody's dying for good material. Independent producers and major production companies are springing up every day, and they're willing to pay a lot of money for a screenplay they like and think is commercial.Dennis Shryack is a marvelous example of a screenwriter in Hollywood. Working with a partner, Shryack wrote such films as Pale Rider, Gauntlet, Flashpoint, The Good Guys and Bad Guys, and The Car. He started out in the shipping department at Universal Studios, worked on the old General Electric Theater, then became a literary agent. He worked first at the Sindell Agency, where I first met him, then moved to Eisenback-Greene-Duchow. He stayed there several years, then started writing original screenplays. When his screenplay for The Good Guys and the Bad Guys was sold, written with Ron Cohen, he left the agency and became a full-time writer."When I was an agent, I was always on top of things," he says. "I knew exactly what every producer was looking for. I went out every day and talked to them. You have to understand that when you go out with an original screenplay to sell, you have no package, no star, no director. The script has to stand or fall on its own."Your script has to get past all those initial readers to the head of the studio who reads it and sees nothing but dollar signs. Their job is to pass, so you can't give them a reason to say no. And the bottom line is money. They've got to read it and know if they buy this script (a) they can cast it, and (b) even if they can't get a big name for it, the picture itself, the idea, the action, or whatever else is in it, is going to sell it."On the other hand they've got to feel free to go to the marketing people and say 'What do you guys think? Can we sell it in Europe? Will it play Japan?' The marketing guys are the number-two guys at the studio now, and they're very important."Sidney Ganis explains the process. "If the

studio is thinking of buying a script, this is what happens most of the time: 'What do you think of this story?' the production executive asks. 'What is it that you think is marketable? What happens if we put Robert De Niro in it? What happens if we put Charles Grodin in it, and not De Niro? In your marketing opinion what elements are going to make this idea work?'"We have a script right now in production," he continues, "that is about a kid committing suicide (Permanent Record, written by Jarre Fees, Alice Liddle, and Larry Ketron). A very serious subject matter. And this story is about what happens to friends. How this has changed their lives forever. We have two marketable lines. We can possibly market it directly to a seventeen-eighteen-year-old audience, to whom the subject matter is extremely important. So we can use suicide as an element to sell the movie."The other thing we can talk about is the exact opposite of that, that is, what happens to the group of friends? How do they come together, and how do they decide to live their lives after this has happened? What good, uplifting connection is made between the tragedy and moving on with their own lives?"One of the ways we figure this out is by isolating the elements and creating story concepts and then testing those concepts through market research. We feature different elements of the story in each of the different concepts. We'll write three separate and distinct ways to position the story and send those concepts into the world, via our research machinery. One concept would likely be about teenage suicide, another would be about 'renewal,' and a third would be about the cast of highly talented young newcomers in a story set in contemporary teenage times. As we sample potential audiences, you'd be amazed at how clear people are about what's going to turn them on to see a movie. It's a good technique and gives us a sense of how we might position our advertising. I say 'might' only because you can never count on research to tell you what to do. As long as we're in this business, it's going to be our own instincts plus whatever other intelligence we can gather to finally lead us in an appropriate direction."This is standard marketing procedure within the industry. Using insight and basic marketing skills, the marketing people isolate and select those few elements that can sell a picture. Just look at Fatal Attraction (James Dearden). The emotional ingredients of a brief extramarital encounter are carried to their logical extreme. It is, as advertised, a "terrifying love story." Sometimes the consequences of an emotionally charged moment can be very high. There are certain elements in a screenplay that evoke an interesting response from the reader, and that's what marketing people look for. Fanny Couturie, staff reader for the David Geffen Company, argues that "there will always be movies that cater to the most basic audience interests. But in the last couple of years, mainstream audiences have become more interested in movies that are less obvious, less flagrantly commercial. They seem to be ready for something more thought-provoking or unusual. Movies like Amadeus (Peter Shaffer), Stand by Me (Raynold Gideon and Bruce Evans), Platoon (Oliver Stone), Blue Velvet (David Lynch), and Beetlejuice (Michael McDowell and Warren Skaaren) might not have been produced five years ago and are reaching a much bigger audience than they would have then. We're on the edge of the culture in this business, so the scripts I recommend change with the times. It's only natural, and I have to say I'm delighted with this particular change."When you work as a reader," she continues, "the executives you work for are bound to disagree with your decisions from time to time. So I'm analytical. I don't just give my opinion. I try to explain why I think a script works or doesn't work, why I think it will play well or fall flat for an audience. When executives can understand how I think about a script, I feel they're in a better position to form their own opinions and to improve a script even if they disagree with my recommendations."Anyone who evaluates the market--reader, head of marketing, or studio executive--has to know what elements seem to be the most salable ingredients of the individual screenplay."What astounds me," says one studio executive, "is that writers go off and spend months of their lives writing a screenplay before they go to the trouble to find out what pictures are being made, and what pictures the studios are about to make. There've been too many occasions where a script, or a story, or an idea that someone comes up with is very similar to Steven Spielberg's next movie, and how the hell are you going to sell that?"I think selling a script," he continues, "is the same thing as getting a job. The talents of getting a job in the movie business are the same talents that are required to become and stay successful. They are initiative, exploration, original thinking, and innovative ideas."Many writers--and I read more than five hundred scripts a year--do not realize that a screenplay is a selling document. When they're writing a screenplay, they're not writing a movie. They're writing a script, material that's going to be read, not seen. And it's the reading experience that will determine whether the movie gets made or not."For example, we read a script about three brothers. They all grew up in the backwoods, hillbilly country. Two of them moved away to the city, and one stayed behind. In the city one of the brothers goes crooked, the other becomes a cop. The script opens with one of the brothers being killed, and the hillbilly brother comes to the city for the first time to link up with his city brother and help solve the murder."What's appealing about the script is the wonderful fish-out-of-water elements; someone who is out of their familiar environment and the clash of cultures between the city boy and the country boy. There's a lot of richness in this story, and it has some definite marketable elements, but the script was poorly written, and we passed. UA picked it up and bought it, I think, for \$600,000."Not bad. A fish-out-of-water story has many marketable features. Just look at Short Circuit (Steve Wilson and Grant Maddock), Splash (Lowell Ganz, Bobaloo Mandel, and Bruce J. Friedman, from a story by Friedman and Brian Grazer) E.T. (Melissa Mathison), or Three Men and a Baby (James Orr and Jim Cruickshank, based on Coline Serreau's French Comedy Three Men and a Cradle) to name a few. The elements found in these screenplays are salable; the situation can be expressed in a few sentences. It's important to remember that most of the people in Hollywood only "see" what's on the written page. "If it

ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage" is the old Hollywood saying. When I was reading at Cinemobile and Cine Artists I sometimes would recommend how something could be fixed, and I would get no response at all; simply a blank stare. The executives had no visual understanding of what I was trying to say about the material. They just checked out. It's no different today. Nobody can "see" anything. If the script does not appear to be marketable at the present time, nobody's interested in how it could be fixed or made better. So people pass. "You can't give people a reason to say no," emphasizes Dennis Shryack. "People in Hollywood only get in trouble when they say yes. As long as they keep saying no they keep getting promoted and one day may run a studio." The elements that make your story attractive, salable, commercial, marketable, whatever, need to be executed on the page. Readers have to be able to "see" it. Not many people in this town buy a screenplay or a treatment for the idea, because then they have to find a writer to write or rewrite it. It's too costly a process, and Hollywood spends too much money as it is. "It's the most expensive art form there is," says Larry Jackson, now vice president of production at Orion Pictures, formerly vice president of production at the Samuel Goldwyn Company. "That makes us one of the most conservative industries in the country. Because it takes so much money to mount an individual project. There's no way you can do a prototype for a few bucks to test it with the consumer. You've got to spend millions of dollars to do something. That's the nature of the movie business. Therefore, the financing is always precarious, so there's a tendency for people to take a very conservative approach. Everybody thinks that when they finance something, it should be 'safe,' which means doing something that's already been proven successful." The whole aura of the movie business that's been built up over the last ninety years has been about fantasy. It's been about selling sizzle to the audience. The biggest danger we have is when we start to believe the fantasy ourselves, and then people on the creative side and the business side start to sell each other the fantasy and the sizzle, hustling each other. That's where you start to lose control. Fantasy and sizzle is what we should be selling to the audience. When we start to lose sight of that reality, we start making the wrong pictures. "I get calls from producers all the time saying they're looking for scripts with sizzle, something like a cross between Star Wars and Annie Hall. The truth is that these producers don't have any kind of singular vision or point of view. They don't understand that there is no such thing as a Woody Allen movie. There are Woody Allen movies and other movies. You don't make a 'Woody Allen movie'; Woody Allen makes Woody Allen movies." People don't get it. It's so simple that they don't see it. Most studio executives don't really look at what the audience responds to in a movie. They only see the result, not the cause, like a doctor treating the symptom, not the cause, of the illness. "So the schlockmeisters of Hollywood," Jackson continues, "look out there, see the box office results of Star Wars, for example, and declare that what the KIDZ really want is a science fiction Western with robots that look like overhauled Electrolux vacuum cleaners. 'I've got one of those in the attic,' they say." At one point I went through a list of the hundred top-grossing films of all time in Variety and calculated that essentially sixty of them were original to the audience at the time they appeared. That's not to say that nobody had ever made a movie like it before, nobody ever made a success story like Rocky before, but they were not following an established trend at the time they appeared. They created the trend, they didn't follow it. It wasn't a stab in the dark; it was the recognition of emerging tastes and myths. "Research the market before you begin. See whether your idea is in sync with what the market is today. Then you can sit down and spend six months to a year writing your screenplay. Forget trends, they don't work. Forget commercial, because commercial is what sells, not what you think will sell. Not too long ago I had an experience that illustrates this. I received a letter from an elderly man in Texas who stated he had a screenplay that would ultimately be more successful than Star Wars, Beverly Hills Cop, or E.T. He went on to explain that it was the kind of script that would attract everyone, young and old, rich and poor, student and nonstudent. Then he started talking about the Bible and the power and influence of Jesus. Then he pitched me: "This is a story about Jesus and his dog," he wrote. And he went on to explain that nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jesus had a dog, but nowhere in the Bible does it say he didn't! Well, there it is. There is a moral to that story. When you sit down to prepare your screenplay, part of your preparation should be devoted to researching the market. Bible films are not being made today, regardless of how good or bad the screenplay is. You might point your finger and say: "What about King David (Andrew Birkin and James Costigan) with Richard Gere? And I say look at the cost of that film and look at the return: it cost 20 million to make and never broke into profit. (A film has to gross 2 1/2 times its negative cost to break even.) It didn't do well at all. There's not much difference between that script and the man's script from Texas about Jesus and his dog. King David is obviously better written, with more of a story and commercial appeal, but the bottom line is whether there is a market for your material. What kind of scripts offer the greatest marketability?" "I don't think anyone can go wrong writing action," Dennis Shryack states. "It doesn't have to be action from cover to cover, but basically it should be a story that moves fast and has some action in it." The studio wants to make about fifteen movies a year. Of those, they're looking for a Woody Allen movie, something like Turning Point, and a Terms of Endearment. Plus four or five comedies. The rest are going to be action-oriented pictures, a Robocop, Lethal Weapon, or a romance thriller like Fatal Attraction. So if you write action, you've got half of their scheduled budget to aim for. And the odds increase that you can sell one. "Action films always play Europe well. The studio knows they can make their money back from them. When I was at the Cannes Film Festival with Pale Rider, the most common question I heard was 'Will it play Japan?' In other words, does this picture need a lot of subtitles to explain what's going on, or can it be understood on its own, without anything? Is the subject something that

only the American mentality can understand, or can it be understood by everyone, of any culture?" An action picture plays well anywhere. It doesn't need a lot of subtitles to explain what's going on. Most of the number-one box-office stars in the world are action stars. Almost everyone. Why is that? Because these pictures play well in Japan. "Most new writers don't want to hear that. But, that's the bottom line." It's something to think about. When I'm traveling, I always watch the in-flight movie without earphones. If I don't understand what the film's about, then I know the film wasn't very successful. I remember watching Maxie, and I couldn't understand anything. I first saw Witness on a plane, the same with Baby Boom. Two entirely different films, yet you could understand them without hearing any dialogue. It's a good exercise. Try it the next time you're flying. It illustrates what the studio executives are up against when they buy a script to produce. All we do as an audience is focus on what we don't like about the film. And that's the way it should be, because we're the ones paying the price of admission. "What is the market?" the studio executive repeats questioningly. "I don't think you can tell. I think the most important thing is to avoid what's familiar. Avoid the trends that exist. If you follow the trend, you will usually fail." "If you avoid what's familiar, and search for what is quickly engaging, then I think you'll find what the new market is." I'm on the receiving end of the creative end. And to be attuned to what to buy is the same as what it is to be attuned to what to write. There is very little recognition of what a starved community this is. What a starved business this is. We're always searching for more movies to make. We never have enough. We say we're going to make fifteen movies a year and I don't know whether we ever will. We never did at Paramount, and we said it the entire four years I was there. We never made fifteen movies a year because we didn't have the material. "Everyone's scrambling for the next movie. And they don't care where it comes from." When you talk about the market, or about selling your screenplay, you have to know what the bottom line is. And after talking to all these people about the market, it seems to me that the bottom line is simply choosing a subject to write about--wanting to write a screenplay because you're passionate about it, because it's something that interests you, because it intrigues you. Then research the market to see what films are currently in production. Choosing a subject to write about is no longer jumping into a character, situation, or experience. It's more than that. Know what the market is before you begin writing. And as you're writing, don't focus on selling the screenplay, and how much you're going to get for it. Don't focus on the results of your actions. In the famous Eastern text, the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the major themes is learning not to be attached to the fruits of your actions. In other words, don't write your script because you want to sell it for a lot of money. Write your script because you want to write it. That's your job as a writer. When you really think about it, the bottom line is simple: what you write is really the market. You can talk about it, discuss it, argue with it, condemn it, or fight it, but: You are the market.