

FILM

The Big Chill (1983)

Lawrence Kasdan & Barbara Benedek

ANALYSIS

The Big Chill was a hit directed and co-written by Lawrence Kasdan, with Barbara Benedek. A group of college friends who graduated in virtually the same year as Ben in *The Graduate*...have a reunion. It is like a sequel that shows how many graduates in the sixties turned out, revealing effects upon them of the counterculture. They all seem brighter than Ben, they all had plans and as graduates they were more idealistic. Fifteen years older now and more educated by experience, the friends represent the elite, the best of their generation, and the best of them was Alex, whose suicide brings them back together on the occasion of his funeral.

As they gather, their nostalgic mood is conveyed by the irresistible pounding rhythms of *I Heard It through the Grapevine*. Throughout the picture, upbeat popular music from the period on the sound track evokes the youthful sentiments that defined the sixties, eliciting not only the universal nostalgia for youth and lost innocence, but also the unique intense nostalgia for the specific counterculture of the sixties at its peak, the recycled myth of Eden before the Fall. Of course, the counterculture had an opposite aspect as dark as any since the Civil War, the snake in the Garden. *Woodstock* on the one hand, rebellious murders on the other. Although *The Big Chill* is about paradise lost, it feels warm and wholesome, avoiding politics and pain. The friends spend a few days together reviving the good vibrations of their youth. The downside legacy of the sixties is revealed when they try to understand the suicide of Alex, who was "too good for this world." At the funeral, the minister says that Alex represented hope, and he urges a revival of hope, as if Alex is like Christ, a martyr who sacrificed himself to save others.

All of the friends are likeable on the surface, even the conniving journalist played by Jeff Goldblum. It helps that all of them are actually good looking movie stars with entertaining personalities. Back in college, Goldblum wanted to become a novelist, but instead he became a pop journalist writing trivia for *People* magazine, purveying the values of Hollyworld. The most immature of the friends, as a houseguest he sleeps in a child's bed in the nursery. He openly admits to being a selfish, insensitive, manipulative opportunist and tries to make these traits seem virtues. Within hours of Alex's burial, he tries to seduce his girlfriend. He is constantly on the make, and spends most of his time trying to snake his friends into investing in his plan to open a nightclub in New York that one of them describes as a jet set greasy spoon. He is the last to get up in the morning, thinks jogging is a joke and misses a lot of what goes on because he passes out on drugs. When nobody will invest in him, he gives up his nightclub scheme and says without conviction that maybe he will revive his college dream of writing a novel.

Goldblum recalls that in college the friends thought owning property was a crime. They were Marxists. Now, after the funeral, they are houseguest dependents of the most capitalist among them. They play ball with the businessman, Kevin Kline, who seems to be the smartest of the friends, to have been the first to outgrow his youthful radicalism, to have made the most successful adaptation to real life, to affirm the capitalist system and to represent America. He and the actor played by Tom Berenger joke together about making so much money. The evolution of the friends toward conservatism is conveyed by their geographical movement from their meeting at the University of Michigan up north to reunion fifteen years later down on Kline's plantation in the Deep South.

The friend named Sam who became an actor comes straight from Hollywood. Samuel means anointed by God or his name is God. Against type, this actor is modest and knows his limitations. He is merely a television actor starring in a ridiculous show about a private eye named Lancer, a modern knight--that is to say, a handsome stud with a sportscar convertible and all the gorgeous women he can handle. In reality, he is a neurotic loner. As a pretender by profession, he is so insecure he does not know who he can trust. He is divorced and so alienated from his daughter that he asks a friend, "Can I be that big an asshole?" When the

friends gather in front of a television set and watch his show, he is embarrassed as they cheer him on in his phony role, applauding his shallow personality and promiscuity. Sam cared about Alex, but he has never had any real commitment to his ideals. He has been acting all along. Alex used to call him Sam the sham. Urged to demonstrate the running leap into his convertible that opens his show, he tries but falls short and makes a clumsy fool of himself. When propositioned by his friends played by JoBeth Williams and Mary Kay Place, he turns both of them down to avoid any kind of personal involvement or commitment.

The rejection infuriates Williams, who accuses him of leading her on for fifteen years, ever since college. Though she has had no actual contact with him in all that time, his acting has misled her to believe that he wants her as much as she lusts after him. Williams plays the unfulfilled wife who made a practical choice to marry a very straight, reliable but dull man who would be a good father and provider for the children she wanted. Since encouraged in college, she has also wanted to be a writer, but she lacked the necessary commitment. Living an affluent life, she has had plenty of leisure to pursue her dream, yet she feels frustrated. She has imagined herself an artist just as she has fantasized that Sam desires her. When her trusting husband leaves her behind to enjoy herself and goes home early to look after their children, she throws herself at Lancer, eager to leave her family for a romantic life in Hollywood, but as always Sam is a sham. Their lust is a bust. Both are disappointed and return to their former lives, Sam to the freedom from commitment he wants and Williams to the security she needs.

Kline the businessman is the most practical and healthy of the friends, a jogger who buys running shoes for all his guests, tries to help one of them give up using drugs and solves other problems. He is also the most loyal to family and civic values, even the most loyal to his alma mater. As a conservative now, he wants to preserve what he loves from the past. He still enjoys listening to sixties music and seems to have absorbed the most positive values of the counterculture. He loved Alex. At the funeral, when giving a eulogy, he is grieving so deeply that he breaks down, he cannot finish and has to be helped back to his chair. He is a loving attentive father, an egalitarian husband, a generous friend and for the most part an ideal citizen. However, he has also absorbed the countercultural attitude that breaking the law is okay if you feel like it. He jogs in a fog. All the friends are by now corrupted in some degree, betraying the gospel of Alex. The businessman is an inside trader similar to the capitalists the friends used to condemn, unethical enough to violate sixteen government regulations, though not out of greed, but only to help others. When his pal the impotent Vietnam vet and drug dealer played by William Hurt runs a red light, Kline makes a deal with the cop, then chastises Hurt for his misbehavior, not on ethical grounds, but because Kline has a respectable position to maintain in the community.

Hurt was loyal and hopeful until he got injured while serving his country in the Vietnam War, leaving him impotent. Like many in the American military as a whole, he was disillusioned and alienated by politicians and protesters back home. When his friends discuss why Alex killed himself, Hurt turns sarcastic and tells them off: "You don't know me at all," "It was easy back then, it's out here in the world the going gets tough," "We're all alone," "Alex died for most of us a long time ago!" Cynical after the war, Hurt did not complete his doctoral dissertation, he quit working as a psychologist giving helpful advice on the radio and now he sees the world through dark glasses. He has quit all his jobs. He lost respect for authority and has become a hedonist. During the reunion he gets high, turns into an actor and films an interview with himself that parodies Hollywood. After Kline chastises him for acting abusive to the police officer, he replies, "When did you get so friendly with cops?" Then, however, when Hurt agrees to jog along with him in the fog, Kline passes along an inside trader tip and offers to let Hurt live in the dark old rotting shack on his property where Alex used to shack up with his girlfriend Chloe, played by petite Meg Tilly. Hurt agrees, feeling attracted to the lonely isolated place and to Chloe.

Alex was a scientific genius who turned down a fellowship to become a social worker, seduced into betraying himself by the hyper idealism of the counterculture. The illusions, prejudices and peer pressure of political correctness ruined his life. He moved from job to job, grew unhappy and so alienated he became his own Judas. Dependent on his friend the businessman, he accepted his hospitality and his unethical trading tips, betrayed him by having an affair with his wife and then committed suicide in his bathroom, slitting his wrists. What a nice surprise for his friends. We finally learn that Alex killed himself out of guilt and despair as the loser in a symbolic love triangle with Kline and his wife. He lost hope. At the end of his funeral, while the mourners depart, JoBeth Williams plays his favorite song on the church organ, with the

memorable refrain, one of the most definitive and often quoted lines from the sixties, “*You can't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.*”

Like the sixties, Alex needed to die. His girlfriend Chloe is younger, from the next generation, a child of the seventies and eighties embodying to Alex in many ways the opposite of what he believed in. She describes their relationship and contrasts their generations by saying that she has no expectations, whereas Alex had too many. She is the living evidence that all the idealism of his generation had failed to influence younger people very much except as a fashion. Unlike him, Chloe has no aspirations at all. She is not going anywhere, she does not even jog, she exercises in place. When asked what she is going to do now that Alex is dead, she guesses that she will just hang around until she gets kicked out. After the funeral, the friends are shocked at how casual Chloe is about his death. To her, Alex seems to have been merely one in a succession of her boyfriends. She appears to be incredibly shallow, completely absorbed in herself and her exercises, stretching her body but not her mind or heart. After she realizes that she is lonely, dependent and needs a place to live, she finally bursts into tears.

Absurdly incompatible with Alex, she must have attracted him only in a physical way, as she startles everyone by exclaiming that they had sex the night before he killed himself and it was fantastic. The little airhead and the impotent intellectual Hurt will not be able to join in body or mind. To have a future they need to attain a spiritual union, if he can overcome his drug addiction through the influence of her devotion to exercise, which is not deep enough to offer him the transcendence of Yoga. She could not save Alex and it seems unlikely that she can save Hurt. She claims that his impotence does not matter to her, but when she says that he reminds her of Alex, the parallel does not bode well.

The best hope to emerge from the suicide of Alex is the attempt of Mary Kay Place to get pregnant. She represents the millions of women in that period whose priorities were influenced by the feminist movement. Wanting a career first and above all, she chose to become a lawyer for the best of motives, to defend the innocent. Naively, she discovered only after starting to practice that sometimes she also would be defending the guilty. Just before he died, she had a fight with Alex and told him he was wasting his life, no doubt contributing to his despair and thereby to his suicide. After dating for twenty years, she finally wants a baby, but she waited too long to commit herself to any man. By now she is making the familiar complaints of women in her situation, that all the good men are married, that the few eligible men are afraid of commitment and so on. Her clock ticking, she hopes to seduce one of her male friends with no strings attached.

Back in college, Mary Kay had slept with Goldblum. Now he volunteers to be her stud. She turns him down, yet holds the option open. Her first choice is the actor, who turns *her* down. Undaunted, she bravely gets drunk and propositions Hurt. Just as he is about to explain what he lost in the war, we jump cut to a different scene downstairs in the mansion, where the friends are alarmed by a scream upstairs! The audience infers it is Mary Kay reacting to Hurt explaining his injury. Instead, the friends rush upstairs and discover there are bats in the attic. Some of the men boldly venture up and battle the bats with pillows. Kline opens a window to drive the enemy out, with the result that more bats come flapping in and drive them batty. Though played as comedy, the scenes connect the Vietnam War to the popular metaphor of going crazy, which applies in varying degrees to the friends, who display the ongoing romanticism of the counterculture.

The romantic wife of Kline, played by Glenn Close, feels that she, also, contributed to the death of Alex. In college she had a magical passion for him, but she made a practical choice like Williams and married Kline. Subsequently, she betrayed them both. She had a brief affair with Alex, then dropped him again and returned to Kline. Her way of redeeming herself in her own heart is to set up her husband with Mary Kay as a sacrificial gesture of love. Kline obliges. Assuming that Mary Kay gets what she wants, or settles for, in one attempt, will the child get what it needs growing up in day care with no father and a cynical mother who compares her impregnation to getting a great break on a used car? The sentimental reunion ends with *Joy to the World* rocking on the sound track, as Goldblum jokes that the friends are never going to leave, suggesting that, for both good and ill, they will always be children of the sixties.

Back at the apartment, Davin sat in an armchair with his cup of tea. “The sixties in soft focus.”
“If the lawyer has been dating for twenty years,” Val raised an eyebrow, “I wonder how many abortions she’s had.”

Davin sighed, “She’s probably infertile.”

“Like the Hurt character.”

“The most idealistic ones became the most cynical.”

“It’s a film about nostalgia,” Sarah said. “The way people want to remember the sixties. Through a warm fog of sentiment, the way they all made friends in the first place.”

“Even with the creepy Goldblum character,” Val shivered.

“They idealized themselves.”

“Yeah, they didn’t really know Hurt,” Davin said.

“Do you remember the cut away from Hurt just before he tells Mary Kay about his injury?” Sarah recalled. “They don’t want to hear that. They only want the good vibrations.”

“They’re batty!” Val exclaimed.

“That’s why Reagan got elected by a landslide.”

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