

Exposition and Backstory in the opening of *The Big Chill*

The exact choice of scenes and their precise content is hugely important in speeding your film along. *The Big Chill* is an old film but it's an excellent example of a film that transmits a huge amount of backstory and exposition information in its opening scenes, setting up a whole group of characters and kicking the story on its way. For a start, notice that an informative soundtrack about the child-bathing comes in *even as we are watching the studio logo*. We then go to the bathroom scene

Bathroom Scene

Look at all the information you get here. A man is bathing his toddler son. This action and his manner to the boy suggests that he is a loving father and new era man who shares the child-rearing. His dress and hair mark him as middle class. The bath and the objects in it reveal that this is a very comfortable middle class home. The fact that such a little knows and can sing 'Joy to the World' (a 'sixties song) suggests that he has heard it around the home from his parents. The phone rings and is answered by a woman, who introduces herself to the caller as a doctor. We can tell from her dress that she is slightly Bohemian and middle class. Her manner when she listens then hangs up the phone suggests she has just heard very bad news. (Note how the setting for this scene – the father bathing the couple's child – is 'real but unusual'. While seeming absolutely natural, it permits very economic transmission of a lot of character information.)

The Man being Dressed

The next scene shows a man's sock being pulled up by a man's hands. We will keep cutting back to this man's body as the opening sequence progresses. At some points it seems as if the man is dressing himself. At other times it seems the man is being dressed by a woman with long red finger nails, whom we read to be a prostitute ministering to a client. At the end of the sequence, the woman's hands pull the man's shirt sleeves over sewed-up scars on the wrist. We realise with a shock that the man is a corpse. This is the film's hook, and it is very powerful.

The Housewife

We next see a housewife in her immaculately tidy, gleaming modern kitchen. Here, the woman's dress and hair style are much more conventional than those of the other characters whose faces we've seen so far. Even her china cup and saucer are more conventional (the other characters so far would use coffee mugs). She looks middle class but not Bohemian. Her pullover could be a tennis pullover.

The Man of Books

The next character we see is a man rummaging through items on a cluttered desk with a typewriter. It is positioned against the wall of books. The desk and the books tell us that this

man lives by intellectual pursuits. His woman friend behaves like his partner. She finds the batteries for his miniature cassette tape recorder, an item which will later prove important in the plot. A tape recorder is an important tool of the man's trade as journalist. The fact that the woman knows where the batteries are reveals that she is familiar with, indeed, probably lives in the place. The way in which she gives the man the batteries and he responds, suggests that he often loses things and gets angry about it, and she often finds them for him. The dress and appearance of both characters mark them out as middle class, probably Bohemian.

Note that the woman gives the man an item that is actually important to the film. Even the item is exposition! She could have expressed the character point of loving sympathy equally well by finding him his toothbrush.

The Business Woman

The next character we see is the woman in the office. Her dress, her coiffed hair, her briefcase and the modern, roomy downtown office in which we see her all suggest that she is a high-flying executive, probably an accountant or a lawyer. She smokes, suggesting she is habitually under stress. Note that among all of the very modern equipment in the office, there is a grandmother clock on the wall. This very homey, domestic item is a subliminal signal of something that we will find out later, namely, that this woman is really yearning after things domestic (she wants to get pregnant).

The Actor

The next character we see is a man on the plane. He has drunk a lot on the plane because he has a line of empty miniature liquor bottles, and asks for more. He is travelling first class, because we can see another passenger in another compartment behind him. The hostess shows him a picture of himself on the front cover of one of the aircraft magazines, thereby revealing him to be an actor. He is clearly pleased to be recognised but is also a bit bored by it. His insistence on more drink suggests that he is getting up Dutch courage. Because he is coming by plane we know he is probably coming a long way.

The Girl Exercising

The next character we see is a girl, younger than all the characters so far, exercising on the floor in an empty room in an older house. Her expression is impassive. She could be a dancer from her physical mobility and fluidity. We can tell little else apart from that.

The Driver

The next character we see is a man in an old Porsche – not a new Porsche. This suggests that he was once wealthy enough to buy a Porsche but probably isn't wealthy now. His choice of car, combined with the fact that's driving on his own suggests that he has no family. He is wearing expensive sunglasses which make him look a little mysterious. He opens the glovebox to reveal two pill bottles, one of which he takes out. The fact that he has a range of drugs in his glove compartment reveals that he takes and keeps a variety of drugs handy. The efficient way in which he one-handedly tips the bottle on to the seat and chooses certain

pills suggests he has done this before. The way he accelerates suggests that the pills are having their effect.

The Shock

At this point we see that the man apparently being dressed by a prostitute is actually a corpse. We realise for the first time that all of the characters are on their way to a funeral. Note that this very shocking and effective hook has been created by the filmmakers using the way in which we read visual clues to trick us into believing a mortician is a prostitute engaged in an erotic act.

Notice that the above scenes are not just character scenes, revealing the normality of each of the characters. The sequence of scenes is actually moving the plot, because we are seeing some of the characters travelling to the funeral. Note that we don't need to see each of the characters to the funeral. This is implied. There is a real art to implying steps of the plot like this. One's instinct is to write in everything, but this is not necessary, indeed slows the film down. In the film *Mississippi Marsala*, there is an example of this. In one scene a character announces that he is about to make a phone call, and describes what he is going to say. In the next scene he makes the phone call and talks as he has described. One or other of those scenes is redundant.

Checklist of backstory/exposition devices used in the start of *The Big Chill*

Here is a list of ticks of the trade for transmitting backstory and exposition, particularly at the start of your film. Beneath each you'll see whether how it's used in *The Big Chill's* opening

1. actions of a person or animal that reveal what has happened in the past

Yes, little boy singing '60s hit that places his parents.

2. non verbal clues – characters dress, subtext, general appearance, manner, behaviour, setting, possessions, companions etc.

Yes, throughout.

3 actions of a person or animal that reveal what has happened in the past

Yes. Lines of dialogue give information about the boy and his father, about the woman who is a doctor.

Yes. The sound track music is 60s music, Its lyrics 'I heard on the grapevine' are appropriate to the action.

4. Arguments and subtext beneath conversations.

There are no examples of these devices.

5. The hook

Yes, a very powerful one. The hook is the fact that the man's body is not being dressed and attended to by a prostitute, but is actually a corpse being prepared for burial by morticians

6. Withholding backstory and exposition for effect

Yes. We are not told the exact nature of the obviously tragic content of the phone call. Note how easy it would have been to make the Glenn Close character blurt out the news about the suicide - it would have been an obvious and natural thing to do. But notice how holding back that information really pumps up the suspense and drives the story forward. We are also not told anything about the young girl doing exercises except that she is so supple she might be a dancer or an athlete.

7. The Protagonist and 'whose story is it?'

The set-up of the story and the main characters of *The Big Chill* is rapid, it's very tightly-written. In a very short time we learn that there is not one protagonist in the film but multiple protagonists. We learn that the film is about a group who are all versions of the same protagonist, namely 'the radical student ten years on'. We learn quite a lot about each individual (apart from the mysterious outsider, the young girl exercising, who remains something of an enigma for the entire film). We also learn the film's central problem, which is the mystery of why the suicide happened and whether the group can survive it.

8. sequences without dialogue to transmit plot and character information.

Yes, throughout

9. The plot itself is a form of non-verbal storytelling

We only see the start of the plot of *The Big Chill*, but even the way the characters act in response to the news of the suicide, and the way their journeys to the funeral are made (in the two instances where we see that) are in character. So even at this early stage the plot chosen shows the characters put in a situation that will permit the characters to act in character.