



ESSENTIALS

How to Watch Hitchcock: 5 Steps to Unlock the Master of Suspense

The director combined camera, sound and perspective techniques to create almost unbearable tension and anxiety for the audience.

By Alissa Wilkinson

July 14, 2025 Updated 3:44 p.m. ET

Look up “suspense” in the dictionary, and there should be a little sketch of Alfred Hitchcock’s silhouette next to it. He never won an Oscar — the academy finally gave him an honorary one in 1968 — but the British director is inarguably one of cinema’s most influential auteurs, the kind of filmmaker even a casual movie watcher has heard of.

Even if you don’t know his movies, chances are you can recognize the shower scene from “Psycho,” or have seen a spoof of his work on “The Simpsons.” My own introduction to Hitchcock came at the tender age of 3 or 4: In “Sesame Street Presents: Follow That Bird,” a plane flies over Big Bird in a cornfield to get his attention — a homage to a famous scene from “North By Northwest.”

Hitchcock’s work is marked by carefully framed images and a fondness for playing with our emotions, but his greatest talent was making us freak out, and showing other filmmakers how to do that, too. With a selection of his movies now on Netflix, here is a beginner’s guide to understanding how the Master of Suspense creates suspense.

‘REAR WINDOW’ (1954)

Step Inside a Character’s Point of View

Hitchcock loved to stick us right in the minds of his characters — many of whom are in the throes of obsession and desire — and thus play on our own passions and nerves. “Rear Window” centers on an all-too-familiar pastime for city dwellers: peering curiously, and a tad illicitly, into the neighbor’s window.

Jeff (Jimmy Stewart) is a photojournalist who’s stuck in his Greenwich Village apartment because his whole leg, from hip to foot, is encased in a cast. Thus stranded and frustrated, he becomes intrigued by the lives of the people living

across the way, an assortment of typical New Yorkers — a composer, a dancer, a lonely single woman, a bickering couple — and he starts to wonder if one of them is a murderer.

To understand the story, to feel Jeff's obsession grow, we must see what he's seeing and allow our curiosity to build alongside his. To make this parallel intrigue more visceral, Hitchcock lets us watch through the telephoto lens of Jeff's camera. It has the same sort of shakiness and framing that Jeff is seeing. Now we're not just observers of Jeff. We're participating in his voyeurism, and we start to wonder if we're the crazy ones, too.

(Stream "Rear Window" on Netflix, or rent it on most major platforms.)

'THE BIRDS' (1963)

Feel the Menace in the Ordinary

"The Birds" plays exactly like a nightmare. Its events aren't provoked by any obvious explanation; it's just terrifying. Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) has followed a man to a small town, and upon her arrival birds begin inexplicable, vicious attacks on humans. In one early key scene, very ordinary things seem to be happening. Melanie is sitting on a bench, smoking a cigarette, while children inside a nearby school sing a song. But nearby, crows start landing on a jungle gym: first a few, then more, and finally a critical mass that seems menacing, even if Melanie doesn't know quite why. Flocks of birds alighting on outdoor structures, after all, are not *that* unusual.

This scene of everyday occurrences gains immense power — and creates sudden fear for us — because of the way Hitchcock constructs what we see. For most of the scene, we're in Melanie's head space, watching her smoke and listen to the children. But the director keeps cutting away to the birds as she notices them growing in number here and there.



The scene cuts back and forth between the growing menace on the jungle gym and Melanie's viewpoint.

Finally, we're with Melanie, observing as a single crow flies and lands on the jungle gym — and it's covered in birds. We see what she sees: a sudden, eerie increase in number. The crows are just sitting there, but she's freaked out. And so are we.

(Stream "The Birds" on Netflix, or rent it on most major platforms.)

'VERTIGO' (1958)

Embrace the Disorientation

Hitchcock reveled in camera techniques that make us not just look at but *feel* tension, fear, anxiety or panic. For him, the movie was a way to play with his viewers, to get them out of their own mood and into a new one.

That often means framing a shot or editing sequences to create disorientation. In “Vertigo,” Stewart plays a man obsessed once again. This time he’s Scottie, and he’s fixated on Madeleine (Kim Novak), whose husband hired Scottie to follow her and figure out why she’s acting so weird. Scottie also suffers from vertigo, a condition that ended his career as a detective after he watched a colleague fall to his death during a rooftop chase.

So it’s only natural that when Scottie pursues Madeleine up the winding spiral staircase of a bell tower, the vertigo kicks in. But not everybody knows what vertigo feels like or fears heights. Hitchcock’s challenge was to put you in Scottie’s shoes and make you feel his vertigo. So his cameraman, Irmin Roberts, came up with the dolly zoom, an effect so linked with this movie that it’s sometimes called the “vertigo effect.” The background seems to change size relative to the subject of the shot, which is disorienting; it kind of makes you feel like falling. Which is, of course, what Scottie is imagining right then — and not without cause.

(Stream “Vertigo” on Netflix, or rent it on most major platforms.)

‘PSYCHO’ (1960)

Let Your Imagination Run Wild

Hitchcock’s most famously frightening scene is also one of his most deceptive. Not too far into “Psycho,” Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), a woman on the run, has taken refuge from a rainstorm at the Bates Motel. After dinner with the strange proprietor, Norman (Anthony Perkins), she’s enjoying a hot shower. And then ... well, you probably know what happens next.

Just showering in an unfamiliar bathroom can induce anxiety. You’re vulnerable, after all. But after letting her (and us) revel in the pleasure of a warm shower for a moment, Hitchcock positions Leigh in the bottom right of the frame, leaving a big,

hazy gap over her right shoulder. Through the curtain, we can see what she can't: a figure appears, moving slowly. We can't tell yet if it has a weapon, but it barely matters at this point. This is bad.

That's terrifying enough, but then the rest of the scene slashes in, and the figure cuts and stabs Marion to death with a knife. The sequence consists of a whopping 78 camera shots and 52 cuts. Those shots are mostly close-ups, meaning we can only see a tiny piece of the action at any moment, and the cuts move quickly and chaotically.



With so many cuts, you can only see a piece of the action.

We somehow enter the scene, becoming part of its violence and panic. Our minds are forced to fill in what's happening, and as legions of horror fans can attest, what your imagination comes up with is usually worse than anything a filmmaker can show you. In fact, audiences often think that the film explicitly displays Leigh's nude body — but that's just your imagination.

(Stream "Psycho" on Netflix, or rent it on most major platforms.)

'THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH' (1956)

Learn to Live Without Dialogue

Hitchcock often likes to dispense with dialogue in moments of extreme tension, but it's done to perhaps its greatest effect near the end of the 1956 version of "The Man Who Knew Too Much." Stewart co-stars with Doris Day as Ben and Jo McKenna, a couple who become embroiled unexpectedly in an assassination plot after the kidnapping of their son.

In a climactic scene, the couple are at the Royal Albert Hall in London, desperately trying to foil an assassination attempt. Ben and Jo find one another and speak emphatically, but Hitchcock doesn't let us in on what they're saying. Instead, we can only hear the orchestra, and the music provides rising tension. As if to underline the fact that everything's coming to a head, we see a man point a gun just as a musician readies his cymbals to clash. Hitchcock keeps cutting to the cymbal player, as if he and the gunman's trigger finger are linked.

By the end of the scene, the gun is pointed, we see the target, Jo screams — and the cymbals finally crash. It's a moment of great catharsis for us, and for the movie, too. Jo's scream and the instrument's clang are of a piece with the sudden shock that the Royal Albert Hall's audience members feel, all standing and gasping en masse. Which, when you think about it, might mirror the energy at that moment in a room full of moviegoers, all letting Hitchcock deliciously manipulate them, too.

(Stream "The Man Who Knew Too Much" on Netflix, or rent it on most major platforms.)

Photos and videos: Paramount Pictures (“Rear Window,” “Vertigo,” “Psycho” and “The Man Who Knew Too Much”); Universal Pictures (“The Birds”)

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