

Film Feature: The 10 Best Hitchcock Jaw-Droppers

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 19, 2012 - 10:38am

- [Alfred Hitchcock](#) [2]
- [Foreign Correspondent](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [List](#) [5]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [6]
- [North by Northwest](#) [7]
- [Psycho](#) [8]
- [Rear Window](#) [9]
- [Strangers on a Train](#) [10]
- [The Birds](#) [11]
- [The Man Who Knew Too Much](#) [12]
- [Torn Curtain](#) [13]
- [Vertigo](#) [14]

CHICAGO – Sacha Gervasi’s “Hitchcock” (which we will review Wednesday) takes moviegoers back to the landmark year when the Master of Suspense reached the final peak of a career that spanned over five decades. Alfred Hitchcock’s artistry, ambition and showmanship were at an all time high when he made 1960’s “Psycho,” a game-changing shocker that galvanized audiences and went on to become his most immortal and influential picture. Yet it is far from the only Hitchcock masterwork that caused audiences’ jaws to drop to the floor. As film buffs become reacquainted with the Master through the recent slew of biopics and Blu-ray releases (including a glorious 15-disc Blu-ray set we will review tomorrow), Hollywood Chicago presents its own list of the all-time greatest Hitchcock jaw-droppers — ten timeless scenes that still manage to jolt, exhilarate and inspire generations of cinephiles around the world.

10. The Crash in “Foreign Correspondent” (1940)



Foreign Correspondent

In “Cast Away” and “Flight,” Robert Zemeckis has proven to be the modern master of staging plane crashes by keeping the camera largely confined within the walls of the doomed aircraft as it makes its fateful descent. Yet the scene that set the gold standard for such an audacious approach was featured in “Foreign Correspondent,” Hitchcock’s second American effort and the first that exuded his trademark blend of wit and suspense. Though the film is packed with memorable sequences, its most astonishing set-piece is the climactic plane crash, which is still convincing when viewed 72 years later. Though Hitchcock does cut to a few exterior shots of the plane, he mainly focuses on the escalating chaos unfolding inside, as passengers struggle to brace themselves for the moment when their plummeting aircraft hits water. In an extraordinary shot, the ocean below is viewed through plane’s cockpit as it gets closer and closer. This footage was shot by a stunt pilot and projected on rice paper, which blew apart at the precise moment of impact, as water exploded onto the set through two chutes. It’s a magnificently crafted illusion that still retains its power.

9. The Bomb in “Sabotage” (1936)



Sabotage

Sometimes artists can be their own harshest critics. Hitchcock always regarded the best sequence in this under-appreciated gem to be a mistake, since it results in a bomb indeed going off and tragically killing innocent lives. Yet that's precisely what makes the scene so potently stomach-churning, as a young boy dutifully travels to deliver a package while remaining blissfully unaware of the fact that it's carrying explosives. His journey is interrupted by an assortment of amusements, as Hitchcock continues to cut to a clock ticking down the minutes. Once the bomb finally explodes before reaching its destination, the film abruptly cuts to the laughter of characters who haven't yet received the terrible news. The theme of laughter provoked by violence runs throughout the film, as the devastated heroine later comes upon a theater full of kids giggling at the morbid cartoon, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" (this film also includes some of the earliest examples of Hitch's unsettling bird imagery, foreshadowing "Psycho" and "The Birds"). Since Hitchcock's films routinely inspire viewers to laugh at inappropriate moments, this film attempts to shed light on the darkness that resides within us all. Only this time, we're not laughing.

8. The Long, Long Murder in "Torn Curtain" (1966)

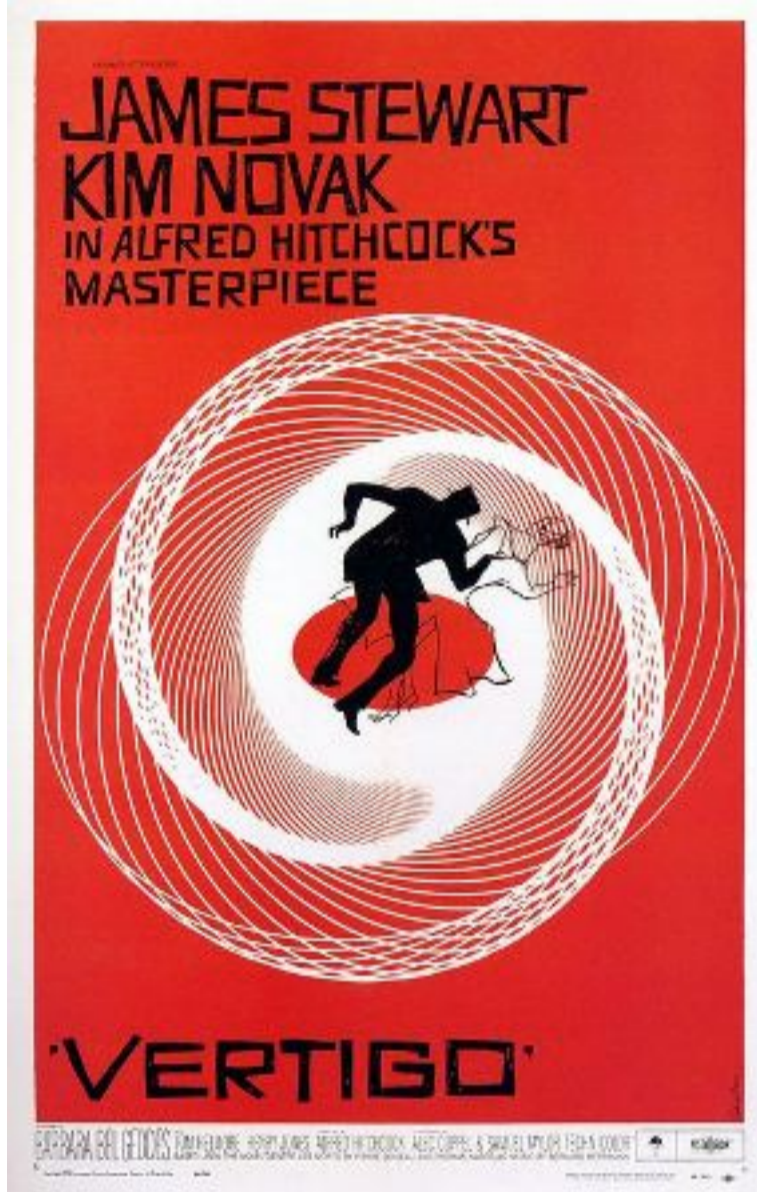


Torn Curtain

Though widely regarded as a failure, this flawed effort is far more watchable than Hitchcock's interminable 1969 follow-up, "Topaz." In the midst of the director's half-hearted attempts at constructing a lightweight espionage vehicle for his miscast (and entirely misused) leads, Paul

Newman and Julie Andrews, there arrives a scene so shockingly brutal and tonally jarring that it removes any shadow of a doubt that old Hitch had darker thoughts on his mind. When confronted by a sinister security officer who threatens his life, Newman decides that he must dispose of him quickly. With the help of a timid woman armed with a butcher wife, Newman struggles to kill the man, but the job proves to be much more difficult (and much messier) than it may have appeared. The woman stabs the officer, but the wound is far from lethal. Then she breaks his kneecaps with a shovel before dragging his head into the oven. His body is held to the ground as his life is drained away with every last excruciating wheeze. Suddenly, the plot evaporates as Hitch forces the audience to regard the primal tragedy of a life being extinguished before our eyes. It's as horrific as it is oddly humanistic.

7. The Nightmare in "Vertigo" (1958)



Vertigo

"Vertigo" is the sort of film that becomes more fascinating with each successive viewing. I first became obsessed with Hitchcock as a preteen, and I initially found "Vertigo" to be his most perplexing. The first hour was so deliberately paced that there were times when I felt I had drifted off, yet I never once lost consciousness. It was entirely Hitchcock's goal to draw the audience into the dizzying obsessions of detective Scottie (Jimmy Stewart), as he follows Madeleine (Kim Novak), a mysterious woman supposedly possessed by the spirit of the suicidal Carlotta (memorably portrayed in a museum painting). After Madeleine appears to commit suicide at the end of the first act, Scottie loses his mind entirely. What follows is a spine-tingling nightmare sequence of such eerie ingenuity that it chilled me to the bone. It includes the infamous shot of a body falling helplessly into a swirling vortex, as well as various glimpses of Carlotta's sinister apparition (now played by an uncredited Joanne Genthon). Perhaps the most frightening image is that of Carlotta haunting one of the film's previous scenes, thus suggesting that she had been controlling events all along. Of course, this all adds up to one giant red herring, but it's executed so masterfully that it gets audiences to believe in the illusion even upon subsequent viewings.

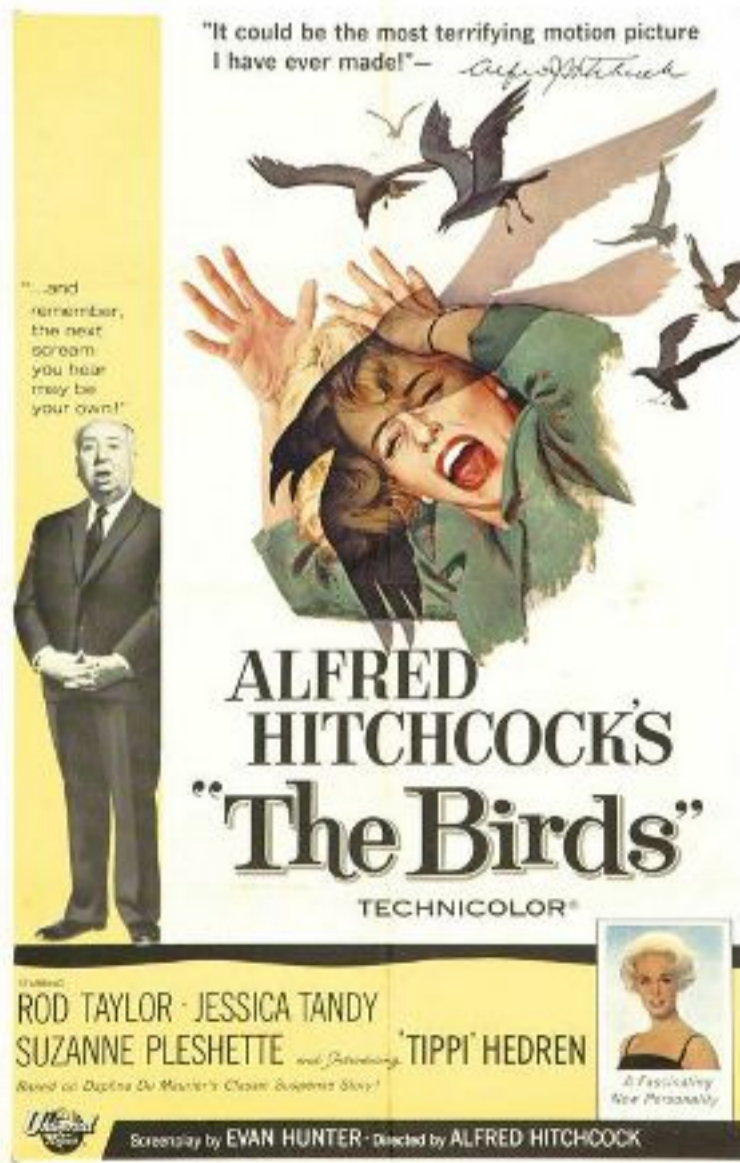
6. The Merry-Go-Round in "Strangers on a Train" (1951)



Strangers on a Train

There are few things more elating for a cinephile to witness than a decades-old classic receiving a standing ovation during a public screening. That's precisely what happened five years ago when the Music Box screened Hitchcock's sensationally entertaining crowd-pleaser with star Farley Granger in attendance. The applause arrived well before the end credits, as the film's overwhelming sustained climactic set-piece came to a shattering close. It all starts with a nail-biting tennis match that leads to a hot pursuit and culminates in a showdown on a merry-go-round that quite literally spirals out of control. This stretch of the film is as impressive as anything the Master ever crafted, and it still manages to thrill moviegoers nearly half a century later. It's also a splendid example of how Hitchcock impeccably balanced humor with terror. When a petrified mother screams out to her young son who's trapped on the carnival ride, Hitch cuts to the jubilant face of her boy, who looks like he's having the time of his life. His expression certainly mirrored that of the audience during that magical night at the Music Box.

5. The Jungle Gym in "The Birds" (1963)



The Birds

The scariest scene in Hitchcock's costliest effects picture is also its simplest and the only sequence set to music. Since the film contains no

actual score (Hitch's trusted composer, Bernard Herrmann, served as the sound designer), the music in this scene emanates from a schoolhouse, where children are required to sing an eerie folk song, "Risseldy Rosseldy." Outside the school, the film's heroine, Melanie (Tippi Hedren), sits on a park bench while lighting a cigarette. She has just witnessed several deadly bird attacks, and is eager to meet with her friend, the local schoolteacher. As Melanie sits on the bench, birds gradually begin to group on the jungle gym behind her. Hitch allows the camera to linger on a close-up of Melanie's face as she smokes, sighs and impatiently glances at the school. All the while, the nonsense lyrics of the song start to grow in complexity, as if reflecting the mounting number of blood-thirsty birds forming just beyond the frame. Suddenly, Melanie's head jerks up as she spots a single bird flying across the sky. The camera views the bird from Melanie's perspective as it flies lower and lower before landing on the jungle gym, which is now completely filled with birds. This single shot delivers such an enormous jolt that it reverberates throughout the entire film.

4. The Crop-Duster in "North by Northwest" (1959)



North by Northwest

Three years before Sean Connery first appeared as Bond, another debonair man outwitted spies and bedded sexy babes without breaking a sweat. His name was Roger Thornhill, played by Cary Grant in what ultimately became his career-defining performance. Like "Strangers on a Train," this film continues to have an ageless appeal with modern audiences, and is every bit as funny, suspenseful and entertaining as the day it was made. Its best sequence is also its most immortal, as Thornhill suddenly finds himself stranded in the middle of desolate farm land. A local man approaches him while waiting for the next bus and makes a keen observation about a nearby crop-duster: "That plane is dustin' crops where there ain't no crops." As soon as the man's bus leaves the scene, the plane turns on Thornhill and begins its terrifying attack. Hitchcock made the superb choice to remove any trace of music while accentuating the roaring engine of the plane as it dives closer and closer toward the ground. The film's great iconic image shows Thornhill attempting the super-human feat of outrunning the plane. Yet even at his most desperate, Grant never loses an ounce of his suave assurance or self-deprecating charm. If any man could outrun a maniacal crop-duster, it's him.

3. The Break-In in "Rear Window" (1954)



Rear Window

“Vertigo” is unquestionably one of Hitchcock’s greatest films, and perhaps his most achingly personal, but when it comes to the Master’s best film of all time, I argue that the honor goes to this phenomenal dissection of cinema’s voyeuristic allure. With his leg in a cast, restless photographer Jeff (Jimmy Stewart) has nothing to do but spy on his fellow apartment dwellers through his enormous rear window. There’s the songwriter struggling to make end’s meat, the old maid dubbed “Miss Lonelyhearts,” and the ominous gentleman named Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr), who Jeff suspects has butchered his wife. In order to help him get to the bottom of this mystery, Jeff’s girlfriend, Lisa (Grace Kelly at her most sublime), decides to investigate the Thorwald residence on her own. This is one of many masterful moments in the film where Hitch’s various individual plot lines start to intertwine in stunning and unexpected ways. As Jeff watches Lisa climb up into the empty apartment, he notices that Miss Lonelyhearts is on the brink of taking a deadly overdose. He moves to dial the police but stops when he realizes that the songwriter’s entrancing music has stopped the woman from performing the horrible deed. It’s at this precise moment that Thorwald suddenly materializes in front of his apartment, though Jeff can’t warn Lisa because it would blow his cover. As one life is salvaged, another threatens to meet its end.

2. The Shower in “Psycho” (1960)



Psycho

So much has been written about why this scene rocked audiences to their very core and how it changed cinema forever. Watching lovely leading lady Janet Leigh murdered in such a gruesome and inexplicable way is no less disturbing today than it was during the film's initial release. Yet Gervasi's upcoming film, "Hitchcock," obscures and misrepresents what truly makes the scene so brilliantly perverse. Hitchcock's obsession with his leading ladies and his insecurity about his own unappealing physicality is expertly chronicled in Donald Spoto's book "Spellbound by Beauty" (and to a lesser extent in HBO's "The Girl"). In many ways, the shower scene is a precursor to the rape scene in "Marnie," as the vulnerable Marion Crane (Leigh) is penetrated by the phallic knife. Her attacker, "Mother Bates," is an embodiment of all the doting, smothering, vaguely sinister mothers that populated past Hitchcock thrillers (from the fiercely wicked Leopoldine Konstantin in "Notorious" to the dangerously clueless Marion Lorne in "Strangers on a Train"). It could also be argued that these mother figures represent Hitchcock's wife, Alma, and the maternal role that she took in her husband's life. While Gervasi's "Hitchcock" softens and sentimentalizes the trials and tribulations of their relationship, "The Girl" offers a starker and more convincing account of the childlike genius and the motherly guardian who allowed him to indulge in his increasingly obscene fantasies. "Psycho" marks the moment when these fantasies built to a head and threatened to tear through the screen. Boy did they ever.

1. The Concert in "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956)



The Man Who Knew Too Much

Here's the scene that made me an official Hitchcock fan. It may not be the Master's very best picture, but it sure is one of his most satisfying, as it guides the audience on a twisting road toward its unforgettable set-piece at the Albert Hall. Ben (Jimmy Stewart) and Jo (Doris Day, in a riveting performance) are desperately pursuing their kidnapped child when they learn of an assassination planned to take place at an upcoming concert. Once Jo arrives, she's threatened by the assassin that her child will be in grave danger if she interferes with his work. As Bernard Herrmann conducts the orchestra and choir in performing Arthur Benjamin's gloriously foreboding "Storm Cloud Cantata," Ben races for help while Jo writhes in tortured anxiety. Hitch cuts between Ben, Jo, the smirking assassin, the doomed Prime Minister and the cymbalist whose single climactic clash will drown out the sound of the killer's gunshot. Day's facial expressions anchor the sequence in a visceral emotional reality, while George Tomasini's editing functions as a metronome for the audience's pulse. Best of all, the scene plays out with absolutely no dialogue to distract from the powerful marriage of visuals and music. Whereas Hitchcock's original version of the scene (in his inferior 1934 version of "Man Who Knew Too Much") sped up the concert and left little time for the suspense to build, the remake allows the action to unfold at the same speed as Benjamin's composition, and when both reach their crescendo, the results are truly explosive. The Albert Hall sequence is a spellbinding masterpiece of pure cinema from a filmmaker whose genius stretched all the way back to the silent era and remains as vital and influential as ever.



[15]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [16]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [15]**Source URL (retrieved on Sep 24 2024 - 8:55am):**<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/20614/film-feature-top-ten-hitchcock-jaw-droppers>**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/briantt>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/alfred-hitchcock>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/foreign-correspondent>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/list>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/north-by-northwest>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/psycho>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rear-window>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/strangers-on-a-train>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-birds>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-man-who-knew-too-much>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/torn-curtain>

[14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/vertigo>

[15] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>

[16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>