COLD WAR STUDIES PRESENTS

# A Hitchcock Halloween

Fear, Paranoia, and the Cold War | Viewing Guide

## Six films. Three viewing periods. One question: what made the Cold War frightening?

Alfred Hitchcock was making suspense films before the Cold War began. Yet his stories of secret identities, surveillance, false accusation, and sudden danger often resonated with anxieties of the atomic age. Some selections depict Cold War espionage directly; others invite a comparison with the political atmosphere in which audiences watched them.

This guide is an invitation to look closely, not a claim that every film was intended as a Cold War allegory.

## How to participate

Watch any number of films using your own streaming or rental service, or a disc you already own. Follow the suggested dates or watch whenever you like. No registration or synchronized screening is required.

## Your festival checklist

☐ Notorious (1946) | Oct 16–18

☐ North by Northwest (1959) | Oct 16–18

☐ Rear Window (1954) | Oct 19–22

☐ The Wrong Man (1956) | Oct 19–22

☐ The Birds (1963) | Oct 23–31

☐ Torn Curtain (1966) | Oct 23–31

## A useful question to keep in mind

Does the film show a specific Cold War threat, or does it evoke a more general feeling of uncertainty, vulnerability, or distrust?

## Notorious (1946)

The fear: Atomic secrets and covert infiltration

In postwar Brazil, a woman recruited by an American agent infiltrates a circle of former Nazis. Uranium hidden in wine bottles turns a domestic setting into a site of international danger.

1. How does Hitchcock transform ordinary objects and private rooms into sources of danger?
2. What does the uranium plot suggest about the new significance of atomic materials after 1945?

**Your observations**

## North by Northwest (1959)

The fear: Mistaken identity and the secret state

An advertising executive is mistaken for a fictitious intelligence operative and pursued by foreign agents. The government’s own deception compounds his peril.

1. Who possesses reliable information, and how does that imbalance create suspense?
2. Does the film portray intelligence agencies as protectors, manipulators, or both?

**Your observations**

## Rear Window (1954)

The fear: Surveillance and suspicion

A photographer confined to his apartment watches his neighbors and suspects one of murder. The story is not political espionage, but it raises questions about observation and inference.

1. When does observation become intrusion, and how does the film enlist the viewer in watching?

2. How might a 1950s audience familiar with loyalty investigations have understood suspicion based on fragments of evidence?

**Your observations**

## The Wrong Man (1956)

The fear: False accusation and institutional authority

A musician is wrongly identified as a robbery suspect. Based on a real case, the film explores how an apparently credible accusation can overwhelm an innocent person.

1. Which procedures make the accusation appear convincing despite its errors?

2. What parallels—and important differences—do you see between this criminal case and Cold War-era loyalty accusations?

**Your observations**

## The Birds (1963)

The fear: Unexplained catastrophe

Bird attacks disrupt ordinary life in a California town. Hitchcock offers no definitive explanation; the link to nuclear-age anxiety is an interpretation, not an explicit subject of the film.

1. How does the absence of an explanation affect your sense of danger?
2. What similarities and differences do you see between the film's attacks and contemporary fears of sudden nuclear catastrophe?

**Your observations**

## Torn Curtain (1966)

The fear: Defection, science, and the Iron Curtain

An American physicist apparently defects to East Germany as part of a covert effort to obtain scientific information. Surveillance and restricted movement drive the suspense.

1. How does the film use borders, state surveillance, and controlled movement to create danger?
2. How does its portrayal of espionage differ from the glamorous world of North by Northwest?

**Your observations**

# Festival finale

Which film best captures Cold War fear—and why? You can choose a film for its historical subject or for the anxieties it evokes.