Opinion: Students need more screen time

By Joe Mathews

California teachers, you should be showing your students more movies.

And not for babysitting purposes. As our state considers new frameworks for how history and social science are taught, now is the time to incorporate that signature California art—film—into classes at every grade level. Movies should be placed at the center of our efforts to teach history—especially the history of California.



Joe Mathews

Have a problem with that? I could quote a former mayor of Carmel and suggest you “Go ahead, make my day.” Or I could utter a single word: Rosebud.

You’d be surprised how many people have no idea where those references come from. As someone whose life revolves around dealing with young Californians—as father, coach, and journalistic colleague of several millennials with fancy college degrees—I’m struck by how little they know of films, and thus of California’s history. The film critic and historian Neal Gabler has warned that movies that once united the generations now divide us, “leaving us with an endless stream of the very latest with no regard for what came before.

Old movies are now like dinosaurs, and like dinosaurs, they are threatened with extinction."

This is not a trivial matter; it is the loss of the essence of our state's history. Our greatest films are California monuments. To be ignorant of them is akin to being Chinese without knowing of Confucius , or to being German without having read Goethe.

So let the education begin now. "Rosebud" is the signature word of the 1941 film "Citizen Kane", ranked No. 1 on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest films of all time. Citizen Kane is a fictionalization of the life of a towering figure of American and California history: the newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. His story remains relevant today, in a state of new media titans with outsized appetites. And his mansion, the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, is a landmark every Californian should visit.

But when you look through the state standards for class content– what all California children are supposed to learn– you won't find one word about Hearst or "Citizen Kane". Indeed, in the 68 pages of standards for history and social science classes, there are only brief mentions of the entertainment industry.

The good news: California is drafting a new history framework–long outlines of what California student should be taught in each grade and subject. The bad news: the current draft on California history says nothing about film, movies, or Hollywood.

To this inexcusable omission of film from California history, my reaction is the memorable line from "Network": "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!" (This line has been a staple of California political discourse, from Proposition 13 through the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis.) California content guidelines must include films that shaped

America’s very conception of itself, from “Casablanca” to “The Searchers”. (They also should require California history in high school, not just elementary school, so more mature themes can be taught.)

No one should get a degree from a California high school without seeing the classics that are signatures of our state’s history. These should start with Alfred Hitchcock’s “Vertigo”—the essential film of Northern California —and “Chinatown”—which still explains, better than any other document, Southern California’s dark view of itself. Other California movies that should be in the cannon include “Sunset Boulevard”, “The Graduate”, “Some Like It Hot” (shot at the Hotel Del Coronado), “The Grapes of Wrath”, “The Maltese Falcon”, “Annie Hall” (to understand why New Yorkers are so dismissive of us), and “Blade Runner”. I’d also add, for cultural relevance, “El Norte”, “Stand and Deliver”, “Pulp Fiction”, and “The Joy Luck Club”.

Incorporating film into class is not a new idea. My own quick search found electives in film—taught in both art and history departments—in dozens of California high schools. Films illuminate historian Kevin Starr’s juxtaposition of “the California of fact and the California of imagination.” For example, you could teach California’s water history by comparing the fictions of “Chinatown” with historical accounts.

Of course, basing California history in films will require overcoming the prejudice that movies are entertainment, not educational tools. I’d point out that, if you look for places showing classic films, you’ll find yourself near our finest institutions of higher education. I was glad to see “Laura”, the 1944 film noir, and “The Philadelphia Story”, the 1940 romantic comedy, playing at the Stanford on University Avenue in Palo Alto last weekend.

Let’s also keep in mind the words of Audrey Hepburn:

“Everything I learned I learned from the movies.” And if you’ve never heard of her, get yourself to the next classic movie night at the Vine Cinema in Livermore. They’ll be showing “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.