WHEN IS “BLU” RIGHT FOR YOU?
Music and Media Library Adds Blu-Ray Technology to Group Viewing Room

The Marian K. Heilbrun Music and Media Library group viewing room now features high-definition Blu-ray technology thanks to funds from an extraordinary budget request through Emory College that also involved University Technology Services.

You’ve probably seen and heard Blu-ray discs and players advertised on television, radio and in print media. However, you may not understand the difference between Blu-ray discs (high definition) and standard DVDs – or which to use with your classes. Here’s the scoop from a recent Q&A with Film Studies and Media Librarian James Steffen.

First, tell us about the Music and Media Group Viewing Room.

It holds 20 people and features a high definition plasma screen. This enables users to view high definition video formats such as Blu-ray discs in their native resolution. We also acquired a new upconverting DVD player that improves the image on standard DVDs. So regardless of the medium they are screening, users will see a much better image than they did previously.

Who can use the room?
The primary use is for classroom screenings. Instructors who want to schedule the room can contact the Music and Media Library, and they can book the media they want to show at that same time or put them on reserve for their classes. Instructors can schedule the room up to six times a semester per course.

Is the viewing room the only place to use Blu-ray technology on the Emory campus?
In the Music and Media Library we also provide two individual study viewing carrels with Blu-ray players, high-definition LCD monitors and access to high-definition television channels.

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The new psychology building has high-definition projectors and Blu-ray players in all the classrooms. If you haven’t seen that facility, I recommend taking a look; it’s a beautiful space.

I should note you can only see content on a Blu-ray disc in high definition if the player is connected to a high definition monitor or projector. If an instructor wants to show a film in a classroom that only has a standard definition video, they should use a regular DVD instead.

So -- what is Blu-ray technology?
It’s a way to store high-definition data on a disc. Information is written onto and read off of Blu-ray discs by blue-violet lasers. These lasers can be focused to a smaller point than the traditional red lasers used to write DVDs. That means that blue-violet lasers can write more information onto a disc because they use less room, and they can read more information off the disc, too.

When might an instructor prefer to show a class a Blu-ray disc instead of a conventional high-definition DVD, regular DVD or video?
Generally, when the film is available in high-definition, Blu-ray is the best choice for viewing. Examples include Pixar animated films and live action feature films in which color and texture are vitally important. The Blu-ray version literally has more information in the image and thus provides a better representation of what the filmmakers originally intended for us to see.

Could you explain this further?
When you transfer a standard feature shot on 35mm film to standard definition video, a huge amount of the information stored on the 35mm film can’t be translated directly into pixels. Therefore, you lose a lot of details and textures in the background and costumes, and even subtleties in the actors’ facial expressions. In addition, a lot of filters must be applied to standard definition video data to compress it enough to fit on a DVD. For example, the photographic grain common in 35mm films typically has to be filtered out, because on a regular DVD it can create distracting artifacts.

However, because Blu-ray is high-definition video, it can preserve more of the texture of the film. It also handles the contrasts between light and dark better. The difference is somewhat like looking at a high resolution digital scan of a painting versus an inexpensive lithograph in an old book. The old lithograph may give you some sense of what the painting looks like, but it won’t tell you exactly what colors were used or how the painter applied brushstrokes. Similarly, when you view a standard definition DVD you can miss out on many of the subtleties, although DVDs of course represented a vast improvement over VHS when they came out more than 10 years ago. Video transfer technology has also improved greatly in the last decade, and that’s an additional factor to consider.

So will all of the films in the Music and Media Library be purchased in Blu-ray format?
The ones that are available on Blu-ray currently are films that are likely to be used for classroom screenings. The Blu-ray discs are on permanent reserve and cannot be checked out overnight. All Blu-ray titles are also available on standard DVD in the library, so the DVDs can be used in classrooms that are not yet equipped with high definition video display. The Blu-ray collection will continue to grow, but for now it will remain selective compared to the much larger standard DVD collection.