

# WIDE ANGLE

DECEMBER 2014  
GENERATION NEXT



Lovers of cinematic storytelling have whiffed some strong winds of change; and it's not just all that new digital technology that has helped to fracture an industry and art form no longer overseen by a few networks and film studios. The best way to sum things up is with a quote from Sandra Valde-Hansen, one of the five Guild cinematographers featured in this annual *Generation NEXT* issue: "Innovation is part of our culture now."

First some context: Valde-Hansen grew up in Florida and started making movies (at 8 years old) with a combo VHS camera/deck. She earned a Master of Fine Arts, Cinematography, from The American Film Institute, studying under Stephen Lighthill, ASC, and learned her craft as a Union 2nd AC. Her most recent feature is the gorgeous *White Bird in a Blizzard*, directed by indie and art-house icon Gregg Araki. Like everyone these days, she mostly shoots digitally, but Valde-Hansen's best friend is her light meter, and her hero is Conrad Hall, ASC. In short, she has one foot firmly in the traditional craft of moviemaking that thrived for seven decades before she was born, and the other in a generation that considers breaking rules just another part of its DNA.

Sundance multiple-award-winner Bradford Young, who shot *Selma* for the young writer/director Ava DuVernay, shares similar qualities. In this month's feature, Young explains how he mated ALEXA anamorphic capture (with Hawk V-Lite lenses) to an "aggressive LUT" that recalled the still photographs of Paul Fusco, most famous for his images of the train that carried Robert F. Kennedy's body (from New York to D.C.) past mourners. "As dynamic as [the Fusco images] are," Young recounts to ICG freelancer Valentina I. Valentini, "some have drag, some are blurry, and there's movement in the still frames. They're of regular people on the side of the road doing something outstanding for a person they admired. In so many ways, our film is the same – it's just us standing on the side of the road, reflecting on history."

Translation: Young used contemporary digital-era tools to recreate the past in a way that is more accurate of what the time period looked like – not an idealized, cinematic version so typical of Civil Rights-era narratives. Innovation meets tradition in a new hybrid model that exemplifies the creative soul of this next generation.

Of course if you want to read a treatise on soulful moviemaking, look no further than our cover story on *Wild*, directed by French-Canadian Jean-Marc Vallée and shot by Yves Bélanger, CSC. The pair surprised everyone last year with the Oscar-winning *Dallas Buyers Club*, a microbudget feature that exploited the best of ALEXA's low-light proficiency. *Wild*, like *Dallas*, gleefully obliterates given boundaries – no lights, no make-up, no bounce cards, just a careful articulation of the sun and the most creative use of super-sharp prime lenses audiences are likely to see this year.

The story, based on Cheryl Strayed's best-selling memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, about a young woman who spends three woefully unprepared months in the wilderness to regain her emotional equilibrium, is a primer in how to wring crazy amounts of innovation from a solid knowledge of traditional craft. Or as Bélanger so beautifully states: "We cinematographers love adding light to control the frame, but we forget that by adding light we are often taking away the natural secondary light that can reveal so much, particularly when you want the face to become a human landscape."

That is also a wonderful description of our December issue: a landscape of creativity that reflects the humanity of new (and past) generations.

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# INNOVATION NATION



Sandra Valde-Hansen on the set of *White Bird* in a Blizzard

As filmmaking becomes fully democratized, many fret that the art of cinematography is being diluted. But what if the technological advancements are having the opposite effect? With so much out there to watch, it may now be easier to identify those young cinematographers of promise who truly capture the art and craft of filmmaking, whether they use celluloid or memory cards.

Today's young DPs grew up with easy access to VHS and digital cameras, giving them an opportunity to experiment behind the camera earlier and cheaper than ever. "Ultimately, filmmaking is a form of visual storytelling," says Los Angeles-based shooter Sandra Valde-Hansen, "and innovation and experimentation let us tell different stories. Innovation is part of our culture now."

Long-time ICG contributor **Margot Carmichael Lester** talked to this year's crop of Generation NEXT cinematographers about working behind the camera in the digital age, from experimentation to inspiration.

# GENERATION NEXT 2014

## Sandra Valde-Hansen



**Home:** Los Angeles, CA

**Education:** Bachelor of Fine Arts, Film & Television, Florida State University, 1998; Master of Fine Arts, Cinematography, American Film Institute 2006

**Most Recent Job:** *White Bird in a Blizzard*, directed by Gregg Araki

**Favorite Film(s):** *Empire of the Sun* (shot by Allen Daviau, ASC)

**Union Love:** "When you're part of the Union, you know safety will be top priority. It's a must. Being a Guild member also offers a lot of training – and filmmaking is a constant learning experience. The Union makes it easy."

"Sandra is the whole package," asserts director Gregg Araki, who worked with Sandra Valde-Hansen on *Kaboom* and *White Bird in a Blizzard*. "I always have a very specific visual aesthetic in mind – 'gorgeous,' 'painterly,' and 'Wong Kar Wai meets Douglas Sirk' is where our conversation started with *White Bird*," the long-time indie states. "She really keeps focused throughout the shoot on maintaining that look – even as I'm distracted with a hundred other things going on."

Valde-Hansen actually does it by the numbers. "I always use my light meter. It's my saving grace and my most reliable friend on the set," she admits. "It helps me maintain lighting continuity throughout a scene. We're always moving fast and trying to be efficient, so I keep my ASA consistent and the same T-stop throughout the movie. When we have five minutes to do turn-around, I know what the numbers are." She also utilizes digital technologies. "We now have the ability to shoot raw images and then apply looks on set. I try to make the looks ahead of time in preproduction so we can apply to monitors when the director's looking at what we've shot."

Growing up in Miami, Valde-Hansen dreamed of a career in film. "At eight I'd get kids together to make videos," she recounts. "I started with those VHS cameras that were a deck and a camera!" She thought she wanted to direct, but after her first project at Florida State, Valde-Hansen changed course. "My professor said, 'You really concentrate on lighting and composition, but your technique with acting could be better.' I realized cinematography was what I loved. After that, I shot everything I could."

Her first professional assignment was as a second AC/loader on a low-budget 35-mm project, *Alligator Alley*, with Emmy-winning DP Tony Foresta; her first DP gig was *Acts of Mercy*, directed by Laura C. Lopez. "It was shot in 20 days, in June and July, in Florida," she remembers. "There are people from that crew that I still work with. Even though we were really in the trenches and sweating, now we laugh because we bonded over it."

Valde-Hansen finds inspiration in the still photography of Nan Goldin and Mario Testino and the hand-held techniques of Foresta, one of her mentors, and Stephen Lighthill, ASC. Another major influence is Conrad Hall, ASC. "I respect his ability to play with light and shadow and how his lighting truly enhances and visually tells the story. That's our main job. It's not just throwing up a light or taking a shot. It's about where light's coming from, how it reflects the story, and where the camera is."

That's why directors like Araki enjoy working with her. "Sandra always has a can-do attitude, no matter how challenging and daunting a day or a schedule might be," he adds. "And when I look at the dailies, I'm always thrilled with what we've accomplished."

