Sensor Envy

I was talking with one of my friends and students David— and he has an excellent camera. He shot with an Olympus OM-D EM-5 Mark II with a Lumix 15mm lens (30mm full-frame equivalent). I was actually curious about the camera (as Josh White, one of my best friends in Korea) has one— and has been taking phenomenal shots with it.

Anyways, I tried out the camera for about an hour, and was quite blown away by it. The autofocus is ridiculously fast, super-fast buffer, and I never missed a shot by simply setting it to center-point autofocus, “P” mode, ISO 800, and just clicking. I shot it all in black-and-white (I liked how the preview in the Electronic Viewfinder was in black and white) and shot in harsh light with -1 1/3 exposure compensation (made the photos look fantastic).

A lot of people poo-poo on the Micro 4/3rds system because it has a “small” sensor. In-fact, David sent me an email saying that he had “sensor envy” (for those with larger sensors like DSLR-sized APS-C sensors or ‘full-frame’ sensors) and I wanted to write this essay about “sensor envy.”

My experiences with sensor envy

I started with a small Canon Powershot SD600 (digital point-and-shoot) and loved the thing. It was small, always in my pocket, and I always carried it with me. I took photos of anything I found interesting— cats, dogs, people, flowers, sunsets, babies— whatever. I didn’t take myself too seriously in photography, I was like a child with “beginner’s mind” — just being curious, exploring the world, and having fun.

I remember how much fun I had when I discovered the “rule of thirds” by following the grid-lines on the back of my LCD screen. I then discovered “exposure compensation” which opened up a whole new world to me. Then the “macro mode” which further enhanced my creativity.

I then stumbled upon other people's photos online, and was blown away by their image quality and the blurry backgrounds in their photo ("bokeh").

I realized this wasn't possible with the small sensor of my compact camera. I so desperately wanted that blurry background and improved resolution, so I researched and discovered I needed a "DSLR." However for a student it was a ton of money (was in college at the time); $600 for a Canon Rebel XT and kit lens (funny enough, bought it from a bodybuilder who couldn't figure out how to use it, and didn't need it anymore).

I saved up a bunch of money working my part-time IT job, and invested. I was so happy with my setup, but still realized I couldn't get the "blurry background". I realised I needed a 50mm f1.8, and like any good beginner, I shot *everything* at f1.8. Everything.

Then I found the dark pit of doom; online gear forums. I started to feel my photography wasn't "good enough" because I was being "limited" by the fact I didn't have a "full frame" camera. I envied those who had a full frame camera (the camera to have back then was the original Canon 5D).

I lusted after the 5D for so long; I dreamed about the "creamy bokeh" I'd be able to get with a full-frame camera, and also the ability to "unlock my creativity" by shooting at ISO 1600 with minimal noise (Oh man, now we have cameras that are clean at ISO 6400; yet we still complain).

One quarter while in college, I took out a student loan ($5000) to pay for my dormitory. Funny enough, I actually realized I didn't need it (got confused with my financial aid). So I had a bunch of cash in my personal checking. And you never trust that much cash to a college student with a lust to new cameras and equipment.

I end up making an "intelligent investment" in a used Canon 5D ($1500) because I rationalized it by saying I could use it to do more photography gigs (and earn money) and all these other lame justifications (I've realized that whenever I need to "justify" a purchase, I should never actually buy it, as it is me trying to rationalize a poor purchase to fulfill my materialistic fantasies).

The first month with the 5D was a dream. I could get "epic bokeh", and shoot at night at ISO 1600 (sometimes even ISO 3200!). But with the bigger camera came bigger problems.

Bigger camera = more weight, which meant it was a pain in the ass to carry with me everywhere I went (whereas when I had my point and shoot it easily fit in my front pocket). Also it was bigger and bulkier, which meant it didn't fit into my backpack as easily.

I also did a backpacking trip through Europe that summer for a month, and even though I appreciated the image quality of the 5D, there were so many instances where I was so tired from lugging it around (I wish I could just throw it away). Even though I made a few good photos, I didn't actually enjoy traveling as much because of the added weight.

Realize that with every upside there is always a downside

If you have a full-frame camera, you probably have more megapixels. More megapixels means Lightroom takes longer to load your images, process them, and import/export them. More megapixels, larger files, means you need to buy more hard drives.

With full-frame the downside in street photography is that you have less depth-of-field (when compared to a smaller sensor). For example, when you shoot with a smartphone, everything is in focus (due to the small size of the smartphone camera sensor). With a micro 4/3rds camera, you have slightly more in focus. With apsc sensor, you have even less in focus. When you work up to a medium format camera, it is impossible to get things in focus (especially when shooting at f2 or f2.8).

Bokeh is overrated

Bokeh is as my friend Garrett says in wedding photography is the "money maker." (Unfortunately) paying photography clients want the "bokeh" because it is a unique "look" they can't achieve by themselves on their iPhones.

But if you're not a full time photographer, making your living off your photography, why do you need super nice bokeh?

In-fact, upon studying most of the great images in history (especially in the past), photographers were able to make amazing photos with "fast" f3.5 lenses and "fast" ISO 100 film. Just a proof you don't need "bokeh" to make a good photo.

I prefer photos with deep depth-of-field; where as much of the photo is in focus. Why? With more depth, the image is more complex and interesting. In fact, I have an aversion to seeing Canon 5D photos shot with a 135mm f2 lens at f2 with a bokeh background. 99% of the photos on the internet are just bokeh shots (mostly of flowers, dogs, and babies).

In street photography, smaller sensors are preferable. You have more depth-of-field meaning that it is more likely your photos are sharp and in-focus. Furthermore, the cameras with smaller sensors are generally more compact, lighter, and easier to carry around with you, and look less threatening on the streets.

Even if you are a “normal” photographer (not focused on street photography)— think of all the benefits of having a smaller camera and sensor: when you go on that hiking trip with your family, you have more energy to enjoy the view of nature (than lugging around that 50 pound photography backpack full of all your zoom lenses). You save money, so you have more money to take your kid to travel and enjoy experiences with them. You have a smaller sensor— you don’t have to worry about constantly upgrading lenses (full-frame cameras sucker you into buying “full-frame” lenses— like expensive Canon L lenses, etc). With a smaller sensor, your

camera is less expensive— meaning, you can travel without the paranoia that someone is going to steal your camera.

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I still have “sensor” envy at times— I have lusted and daydreamed about having a medium-format digital camera (Pentax 645Z). I thought how “legit” I would be if I shot medium-format, the extra detail I would get, and all these additional benefits (the medium-format digital sensor is like shooting a film 35mm!).

However honestly— this is all just an excuse for me. I am too lazy to go out and make better photos, so I always feel the limiting factor is my equipment. Also when I tell people what camera I use, I don’t want to look sheepish and tell them I just shoot with a point-and-shoot digital camera— I want to show them a bigass camera and show them how big my dick is (sorry for the inappropriate reference— but a lot of men who own big digital cameras is to show their (ahem) insecurity). Kind of how you can gauge a man’s insecurity (in inverse proportion) to the size of their car. And if I take this analogy further— why do you think a lot of (male) photographers get really long (and big) lenses?

Anyways— (unfortunately) a lot of photography is status-bragging. If I own a Leica, it means I am rich, and therefore a more “successful” human being that you. If I go to a photography exhibition and I have a Leica around my neck, it means that I am a more “serious” photographer than you, and I will look more attractive than other photographers— therefore more people will like me, be drawn to me, and want to talk to me.

I found this irony after being to all these fancy Leica and Magnum parties— the real photographers (Magnum photographers) never had their cameras around their neck, and always wore the shabbiest clothes (I saw Bruce Gilden at the Magnum/Leica/Paris party with his infamous ‘photographer’s vest’ on). The ones that are dressed up to the gills in fancy suits, ties, and expensive Leica’s around their necks are often the most insecure (and the worst photographers).

I will have to admit— I have been to a few photography exhibition openings, when I had a Leica in my backpack. Then when I go to the party, and I see everyone else with their Leica’s around their necks, I want to “look cool” as well— and I take the Leica out of the backpack and try to show them “Hey look guys! I also own a Leica— please love me.”

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Friend— it is human nature to envy. Don’t feel guilty; it just means you are a “normal human being.”

But being envious is like poison to your mind— you are never content with what you have, and you are always comparing yourself to others.

I read something (somewhere I don't remember)— probably a stoic philosopher; **never compare yourself to others (or look down or look up at people**). In-fact, don't care about others, just focus on yourself— improving your own mind, becoming more satisfied with what you own, and your own photography.

Imagine a world in which you never compare yourself to others

I went camping with my family in Yosemite this weekend, and I just brought a film Leica and 35mm lens, some black-and-white film, and enjoyed the weekend with my family. We ate tons of wood-smoked BBQ (steak, pork belly, ribs), enjoyed the warm campfire and storytelling, and seeing beautiful views of Half-Dome and El Capitan.

Funny enough— when we went to the touristy spots to take our photos, you see the hordes of tourists with their bigass DSLR's. And the strange thing was that I was constantly comparing myself to them— thinking that I was somehow "enlightened" for only bringing a film Leica— while these "fools" were here with cumbersome DSLR's.

But this is another form of judging that I was doing— and me being a self-righteous and judgmental prick. Why should I care what cameras others are using— they are just enjoying themselves; let them be.

But at the same time the reason I bring this up is that I can imagine all the photographers who show up to take a beautiful photo of Half-Dome are comparing themselves to others photographers— they might feel that their Canon Rebel DSLR isn't as sophisticated and good as the Asian tourist with the full-frame Canon 5D Mark III or whatever (with the red ring around their "L" lens).

To be frank— even bringing the film Leica was overkill. It was so big and bulky and heavy (a film Leica MP with a 35mm f/2 Summicron ASPH lens is heavy as fuck). In-fact, the only reason I "upgraded" from the Leica M6 to the MP was that the MP looked sexier (it is made out of solid brass, which means it shows beautiful patina and wear over time, and it looks more 'legit' than a Leica M6). As time goes on however— I am becoming to disdain the weight of the Leica MP. At times I just want to sell or give away the camera, and switch to something (even smaller) and lighter.

So after a day of lugging around the film Leica, I just left it in the car glove compartment and walked around with my smartphone and just took silly selfies in front of half-dome. And I was a lot happier— a lot lighter, a lot less encumbered, and I just enjoyed the views more.

After all, the point of life isn't to make good photos— it is to enjoy our lives. Photography should supplement our lives, not be the focus of our lives (sorry for the bad pun).

The next time I go camping, I'm not bringing any "real" camera— just a smartphone, and to document silly snapshots, and just enjoy the mountain air, the beautiful views, and don't care about making pretty photos (after all, the Yosemite wallpaper I have on my Macbook computer is more beautiful than any photo I could have taken).

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Whenever you feel camera or "sensor envy" — imagine all the people who are envious of your setup.

In the case of my friend David— so many people would envy his Olympus OM-D EM5 Mark II (with older micro 4/3rd cameras). Or those with bigass DSLR's who hate the weight might envy his camera. In-fact, I even envy his camera and setup.

If you have an entry-level DSLR; imagine all the people out there with iPhones who would die to have your camera and lens.

If you have an iPhone; think about all the people out there (with shitty $50 Android phones) who would love to have your phone.

Even if you have an (older) iPhone — once again, think about the blessing you have to have all these wonderful photography apps (that us Android users don't).

Even if you have a shitty smartphone, think of the blessing you have to even make images (there are tons of people out there in the world who are starving and don't even have enough to eat or drink).

We really have nothing to complain about

Even Xerxes (the ancient ruler of Persia) was never satisfied with his million-person army, or all the lands that he conquered. Enough was never enough.

I have friends who own (several) digital Leicas— but they are always envious of others who have (more) digital Leicas (or lenses) than them. And even those who have every digital camera known to man— they complain that they never know which camera to use, and they still spend 90% of their time on gear forums fantasizing about the newer, better, digital camera that will come out. Or they will fantasize about getting a film camera (an that is another rabbit hole).

Not every shoe fits every single foot

I am sharing my personal thoughts and experiences, but these probably won't apply to you (totally).

Pick and choose the concepts that you read, and discard the rest.

If you own 100 cameras and you are perfectly happy— I am happy for you.

There is nothing "wrong", "bad", or "evil" of owning a lot of cameras, lenses, and equipment. It is only "bad" when we feel like our stuff begins to own us. And it is based on my personal experience that the more stuff I own, the more burdened and stressed I feel.

After coming from my Yosemite trip from this weekend, I decided to "purge" even more of my shit. I locked away my iPad to the closet, uninstalled (even more) apps from my smartphone (all I have left is Spotify, Evernote, Dropbox, Chrome, and Google Maps), I used all the electronics I no longer use and put them into a container (I hope to sell or give these away before going to Vietnam), and I put (even more unused clothes) to my gym bag.

I also cleaned out my backpack— took out all the superfluous things I had in my backpack for "what if" scenarios. All I put in there was a Kindle paper white, a laptop, a smartphone (pocket), some earbuds, and that is it. I locked the film Leica in another drawer (can't be bothered with the weight)— and today I am camera-less. And I feel free. If I really want to take a photo, I'll probably shoot with my smartphone.

And I feel happy— I am sitting at the "Free Speech Movement" cafe on UC Berkeley campus, enjoyed a nice espresso from my buddy Javier, jamming some music, and typing on this lovely keyboard— just talking between me and you.

So to conclude this letter/essay/blog post/article/whatever to you— be content with the camera and lens you already own (because so many others would love to have what you have, and realize that with more expensive equipment just creates more headaches), and to just enjoy your life (don't feel obliged to even shoot everyday, just do what makes you happy).

You have all the blessings in your life. You have vision, ears, legs, arms, friends, family, beautiful nature and trees outside, the ability to interact with other fellow human beings. You are well-fed, well-clothed, and not homeless. You have all of these God-given gifts; why waste any minute of your life wishing for anything you don't have? Appreciate what you got before you, go out, make photos, and be happy.

Love always,

Eric

Tuesday, 10:37am, Dec 1, 2015

Random updates

After the Yosemite trip with my family, Cindy wanted a digital camera. So we ordered a Ricoh GR II (on BhPhoto, no sales tax for us Californians). I consider this to be Cindy's camera (so I don't become attached to it).

In-fact, my current problem is this: I want to keep minimizing my possessions to the point that I don't "own" anything. Why? Not to be some self-righteous wanna-be monk, but to not feel attached to any of my possessions. Because at the time of writing this; I feel that my stuff owns me (more than I own my stuff).

Furthermore ironically— I feel like a slave to any material possessions (camera, smartphone) that was given to me for "free" as a "sponsorship" from companies. I am now proud to say that I have given away all the free cameras I've gotten from camera companies— I appreciate their kind gesture, but I have given them to friends/family who can better make use of it to me. And not only that, I don't feel indebted or like a slave that I "have to" use it.

The problem— I still have a Samsung Galaxy S6 that I got free from Samsung. It is a phenomenally superb phone (arguably the best Android smartphone)— but once again, I don't know if I would personally buy one with my own money if I had the choice. I would probably buy some Nexus smartphone (more affordable than an iPhone, and I love the concept of a bloatware-free smartphone). And even now— I only use my smartphone to make calls, text messages, listen to music, and find GPS directions— what do I even need an expensive or a big smartphone for? Once again— a bigger smartphone screen = more problems (you ever try texting one-handed on a 'phablet'?)

Hopefully over the holidays I'll be able to "zen out" more— drink more coffee, stress out less about finances and the pressure of email and social media, read more books, take more naps, not read gear reviews for other cameras out there, and to be more present to those who matter most to me— my close friends, family, and baristas. And more writing.

And as always— here is a small present for you; I am making (another) new PDF version of the "Learn From the Masters" e-book. Still will take me a while— but below you can download Version 1:

- Dropbox PDF
- Dropbox .iBooks (for iPhone/iPad)

- Dropbox .txt file (to copy-paste into Evernote, print out, add to Google docs, or whatever you want to do with it)

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Rock on.