On Photography, by Susan Sontag (Introduction)

Photography, probably more than any other medium, is emblematic of the nature of modern Western society. Photographs are concerned chiefly with appearances, they are deceptively nuanced but essentially narrow, yet somehow they find great breadth in their mechanization and ubiquity. And, like our society, they tend towards an ultimate reduction of the dimensionality of time. Through photographs the past blends into the present, flattening into an omni-present "now" in which history loses its philosophical weight as it increases in familiarity. In a sense photographs are the ultimate invention of a humanist-capitalist society: they provide the commodification of memory itself! And like the society which originated them, they provide equal portions of help and harm, of truth and of fiction; they have undeniable value, but they also result in a certain loss of innocence, and of deeper values.

The six essays in this book (all of which were originally published in the New York Times Review of Books) provide a critical evaluation of these themes. Ms. Sontag is concerned with what she sees as the cheapening of experience that the proliferation of photographs in our society has caused. She argues that photography has enshrined a superficiality of experience and contributed to the overvaluation of appearances to a point where image has (subconsciously) replaced reality as reality. In many ways this shift in our modes of cultural perception is shattering; it is also completely inevitable and irreversible. As an example: who after seeing Ansel Adams’s stunning photographs of Yosemite could help feeling slightly underwhelmed when experiencing the real thing? Certainly, Yosemite in person retains a certain cachet simply for its "bigness", but the mystique, the mysticism of the Adams photo is going to be missing from most people's experience of the real place.

The image genie is out of the bottle... and Sontag is here to tell us that we have to live with the consequences of its release. On Photography is a lengthy exploration of the implications of the genie’s (photography's) work on society. The book is full of insights into the meaning of an image-saturated society, but you won't find many conclusions at the end. It is, as a good work of criticism should be, a collection of numerous deep and provocative statements with few prescriptions. Sontag leaves it up to you, the reader, to sort out the pieces for yourself.

In fact, one of the things I found most interesting about the essays was that although Ms. Sontag evaluates many of these societal trends she doesn’t seem to have a strictly negative response to any of them. Her attitude seems to be that if, for instance, the easy availability of images of Half Dome makes us enjoy Half Dome itself somewhat less, that rather than stopping looking at pictures of Half Dome or photographing Half Dome we should instead re-evaluate what experiencing Half Dome really means to us. Since we’ve invented a new society, and new ways of looking at society and nature, it's
requisite upon us that we also invent new ways of understanding our experience of life and society. I actually agree with her on this: it's okay to wax nostalgic about the idyllicism of life before the advent of the image-saturation that we have today, but there's no way to go back to that idyllic society. Our time would be better spent in learning to deal with (and shape) our present society than in trying to shift back to an older, now completely lost, ideal of society.

Sontag wants photographers to reach a deeper understanding of the implications of their work. She's not asking the photographer-reader to put down his camera and take up a brush or pen instead, but she is saying that without some grasp of the meaning of photography to society photographers are not very helpful or socially desirable creatures. One of the points that she makes, touching on this, is that our traditional understanding of photography in relation to the other arts is flawed. Photography itself isn't actually an art-form, like painting or music. Or in her words, "Like language, it is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made. Out of language, one can make scientific discourse, bureaucratic memoranda, love letters, grocery lists, and Balzac's Paris. Out of photography, one can make passport pictures, weather photographs, pornographic pictures, X-rays, wedding pictures, and Atget's Paris." Artistic photography without theme, photography without intent, is about as valuable as fiction without characters or plot.

Photographers persist in photographing meaningless objects and minutiae, simply because this is what the "great" photographers have done, instead of trying to draft their own statements and follow their own visions. (Curiously, Edward Weston's photographs of his toilet are actually art; however, my pictures of my toilet would not be art, because I cannot photograph my toilet with any understanding of the meaning of these photographs, and so cannot have any pretensions towards the artistic value of these photographs.)

I believe that anyone who photographs should read this book, whether they merely take casual photos while on vacation or are pursuing photography as their career. We all need to reach an understanding of the act of picture-taking, because only with some sort of understanding can we give our work a sense of direction. And only with direction can photography become more than cultural noise, desensitizing us through over-exposure to cliches and making banalities out of the profound.