The iPhone’s camera used to be a selling point

There are many good reasons to own an iPhone: your social life might revolve around iMessage, you might value Apple’s emphasis on privacy, or perhaps you appreciate the quality of Apple’s displays and software experience. But the one thing that once exemplified Apple’s lead over the Android chasing pack, the iPhone’s camera, is no longer top of the list of reasons to want an iPhone. The iPhone camera has fallen behind, and it’s now something users tend to accept rather than anticipate.

Four years ago, I wrote that to beat the iPhone, you have to beat the iPhone’s camera. At the time, Apple owned the uncontested title for best mobile camera, on the strength of the iPhone’s unique combination of high-quality photos and ease of use. Few, if any, other cameras were as quick and easy to use, and none produced great photos as effortlessly as the iPhone did. With Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and even Twitter all relying on the camera to let people engage and share with the digital world, it was obvious that a great camera was paramount to the appeal of a great smartphone.

Mobile cameras are improving at an incredible rate, but you wouldn’t know it from looking at Apple and Samsung

I wasn’t alone in my estimation of the camera’s importance, and in the past couple of years every phone company has worked overtime to secure a lead in this all-important area. Well, every company except for Apple and Samsung, it seems. The two companies selling the most smartphones have contented themselves with only incremental imaging improvements year after year, and if you’re in a limited market like the US where they’re the only options you see, you could start to believe that mobile cameras have stagnated.

That couldn’t be further from the truth.

Google came out with the Pixel camera in 2016 and raised the bar of expectation for mobile photography a couple of notches above the iPhone. HTC responded with the brilliant cameras in the U11 and U11 Plus. Then Huawei introduced a terrific night mode on the P20 Pro last year, besting the Pixel, only for Google to respond with Night Sight, which was a revolution for nighttime imaging. And now, Huawei has returned with an *even better* P30 Pro that steps ahead of Night Sight. Come the autumn, the Pixel 4 is likely to push us even further into the age of unbelievable computational photography.

Where is the iPhone?

That’s not just my question, it’s a repeated query I’ve heard from readers in reaction to my sample photos from the P30 Pro’s excellent camera. It wasn’t that long ago that we looked to Apple to be the leader in popularizing — if not necessarily inventing — new creative technologies. Apple’s MacBooks are still the most commonly used laptops for DJs and video producers, while iPads are the only tablets making any real progress toward fulfilling the promise of being a whole new creative outlet. But the iPhone, even while maintaining an edge in video quality and improving its stills photography in small ways every year, has been surpassed by faster-moving competitors.

Huawei didn’t settle for merely raising the bar for low-light photography. It has put a 5x optical zoom lens in the P30 Pro, the periscope design for which has also been demonstrated in prototype form by Oppo. Assuming OnePlus, which shares most of its technological base with Oppo, also does a periscope-zoom phone, by the end of the year we could have a choice from as many as four or five different phones with 5x optical zoom. And the results I’m getting while zooming in to 10x and even 24x with the Huawei P30 Pro are very good, too. 2019 is the year when real, high-quality zoom is coming to smartphones.

The conventional wisdom in tech is that Chinese companies, like Huawei, can aggressively pursue zany and risky ideas that more established brands like Apple can’t afford to take chances on. That’s correct. But what’s different about it now is that the chances Huawei is taking are paying off: I’ve seen this company go from a no-name also-ran in smartphones to the purveyor of truly premium devices, as exemplified by last year’s P20 Pro and Mate 20 Pro. This year’s Mate X is the consensus pick for best foldable design we’ve yet seen. And what’s more, Huawei is keeping its aggression up even while shipping as many, sometimes more, phones as Apple is.

Apple’s innovative edge has blunted. The company’s last round of hardware refreshes, taking place at the end of March, occurred via press releases instead of a launch event, and none of the hardware designs were refreshed. Same AirPods, same iPads, same iMacs, just some spec bumps on the inside. The long-held promise of the AirPower wireless charger was ditched, owing to insurmountable engineering challenges. If you’re hearing about Apple engineering these days, in fact, it’s more often related to some reliability problem, whether it be with the butterfly keyboard (which drew an apology out of Apple) or the Flexgate display cable (which, so far, has not).

Photo by James Bareham / The Verge

The iPhone can’t be the best phone if it has the third-best camera

This could always be the quiet before the storm of new groundbreaking designs and innovations from Apple. I’ve been covering this company long enough to not be surprised by its ability to outdo everyone else when it really wants to. The AirPods, for instance, haven’t changed in large part because they were so far ahead of their time when they were first released. There are also rumors of new 16-inch MacBooks and 32-inch iMacs on the horizon, though I’d be more comforted if

I were hearing similar rumors about the iPhone’s cameras taking major steps forward.

The iPhone, for most of its existence, has been the standard-setting phone for mobile photography. Yes, the Nokia Lumia 1020 and 808 PureView happened, but they never put the pieces of usability and quality together quite like Apple’s phone did. Now we have a new wave of Android devices that are doing almost everything right on the camera front. With the P30 Pro’s arrival, there’s no room for the iPhone in the top two camera spots (for stills photography, at least), and Apple is in the unusual position of having to run just to catch up.

If all you’ve ever used was an iPhone, and you keep buying the newest version of what is familiar and logical to you, you might not even realize that there are better camera options out there. And that’s fine, because the iPhone’s camera is indeed good. But in the context of the wider smartphone market, when the people who aren’t already eyebrows-deep in the Apple ecosystem are comparing technical and practical advantages, the iPhone’s appeal is being tarnished by its unusual lack of a class-leading camera.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/3/18291921/iphone-camera-huawei-p30-pro-google-pixel-competition