

Evocative objects essay: 1964 Ford Falcon

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synopsis



In 1964, when I was 2, my mother bought a baby blue Ford Falcon. She drove this car for several years while I sat in the back, asking if we were there yet. Then we moved to Long Island, home of the endless traffic jam. The Falcon's response to the slow stop and go crawl was to overheat, its red emergency light insisting on a stop by the side of the road, hood open, radiator steaming. My mother bought a more reliable car and my father decided to store the Falcon in the garage, in anticipation of the day when he would obtain his American driver's license. Ten years later, I got my license and the car became mine. It was the late 70's of Jimmy Carter and the oil crisis, with lines for gasoline stretching for blocks. It was a time when locking gas-caps were sold to prevent one's hard-earned tank of expensive gas from being siphoned away in the night. I was 17, a teenager in working-class Long Island; the Falcon was 15, already looking rather quaint. We cruised around in the company of other early-60's cars, GTOs and Mustangs and Camaros, the Falcon being the lightweight, little-engined sister to these dual-carbed, neutral-dropping, drag-racing muscle cars.

The car came with me to college, and then on to grad school. It spent a year with me in the East Village, back when this now gentrified neighborhood was a graffiti-covered district of crack-houses and storefront galleries. My then boyfriend, smitten by the retro coolness of listening to baseball games on an authentic AM radio, volunteered to make the daily search for alternate side of the street parking.

Together, the Falcon and I moved up to Boston. By then there were far fewer cars with shiny chrome and big round taillights. Everyone wanted to go for a ride in the Falcon, even though it had no air-conditioning in the summer, iffy heat in the winter, and the sort of doubtful brakes and steering that kept it in the right-hand slow traffic lane. The blue paint was faded, the fenders were rusty, but the car had style. No matter how dully mundane I felt, in the Falcon I was the Driver of that Cool Car. The Falcon was the car we drove away in when I got married. We had a newer car, faster, more reliable, but the Falcon was the festive special occasion car.

A couple of years later our first baby was born. We bought books on baby-proofing, put safety plugs in the outlets, lowered the water temperature below scalding. We looked at the Falcon and saw a metal steering wheel, hard dashboard, dubious brakes and no shoulder belts. We found a new owner for the Falcon, someone who'd take care of it and keep it running, a nice guy with his own acetylene torch.

The car as skin and self



Tools are extensions of the body. A hammer extends the strength of the arm, a telescope extends the reach of the eye. The car is often seen as an extension of the legs: the unaided human walks at a pace of about 3 miles an hour, while the average driver speeds down the highway at 70 miles an hour or more. Yet the car is also an extension of the skin, that protective organ that separates us from the surrounding world. As we inhabit our skin, we inhabit our cars, sitting inside them, surrounded by their rubber, glass and metal. Like skin made of flesh, the metallic automotive skin is simultaneously protective and expressive, it is the interface between the outside world and the inner self. Like skin, the car ages, blemished with dents, rust marks, and scratches.

We embody our cars. Your sense of personal space becomes that of the car's as you drive. Much of the process of becoming a driver is learning to be one with the car, to shift your perception of your own perimeter to the space around your vehicle. To know how wide you are, to judge what spaces you can squeeze into, to maintain the right distance between you and the car in front.

Unaided, people are relatively weak and vulnerable. We have no claws, no poison, no giant tearing fangs. The car, however, makes every driver is powerful and dangerous. The little old lady in the big Cadillac is far more powerful than the huge man in the little Civic. Any car can cause an accident; any car can run someone over. It is a testament either to our great versatility or perhaps to our lack of imagination that we can move so seamlessly from being slow-moving vulnerable bipeds to speeding armored monstrosities.

The car is dangerous, but it is also your protection when you are in it. The car protects you in the dark, in the night. It's doors lock, it's windows roll up. Highways are car-only zones, "Pedestrians, bicycles, motor-driven cycles prohibited" say the signs that guard their entrances: no humans without the protective shell of the automobile is to be near them.

In the car, your social space is the road and the parking lot. The car is your clothing, your identity in the world of the street. A car is signal of taste, money, and driving skills. We read choices of cars the same way we have learned to read hairstyles and clothing choices. The Volvo wagon signals eastern liberal intellectual; its dented beat-up diesel disguises a love of all things organic and generations of Ivy League wealth. The Porsche driver is wrap-around sunglasses allows himself to be admired as he revs his car at the stop-light; some see him enmeshed in an aura of wealth and animal magnetism, others see him as the embodiment of the mid-life crisis.

We sense the identity of other drivers through the action of their cars. The car revving impatiently at the stop sign has its aggressive driver, quick to take offense and with a chronic need to be first. The VW slowly and somewhat erratically floating down the street reveals its driver's ethereal consciousness. The car that flinches at oncoming traffic, even though everyone is well within their proper lane, reveals the nervous reflexes of its frayed and jumpy driver.

There is an automotive agora, on the highways and suburban cruising main streets, in shopping mall parking lots, and on the elementary school drop-off line. Cars compete for lanes and space. There is a choreography of movements, a potentially deadly ballet of lane changing, passing, entering and exiting. They compete for image. Which looks best? fastest? oldest?

The intimacy of imperfection



The car is an extension of the self and yet it can also be an independent agent requiring dialog and negotiation. These are opposite relationships, the first being one of synergy and oneness, the second being one of opposition and duality. When a car works perfectly, doing exactly what it's supposed to do, then it is a tool, an extension, a pure machine. It is when it acts imperfectly, choosing to do some things and not others, that it becomes a separate and autonomous agent, a being to be negotiated with, a seemingly sentient creature with emotions, desires and intentions of its own.

The Falcon exhibited its own preferences for speed, for direction. It required work to anticipate its likely reaction to my wishes. If I wanted to go faster I could not just depress the accelerator, for it would like react by stalling. Instead, I needed to slowly add pressure to the gas pedal, letting up when it felt resistant and listening for a shifting of gears, then slowly, carefully, pressing down some more. The Falcon stalled in the rain, and as it grew older, it stalled on any damp, low-pressure day, teaching me to become, like the pilot of a small plane, attuned to the meteorology of frontal systems. As I walked to work in the pouring rain I could think about the irony inherent in having a car that did not like to go out in bad weather.

Driving the Falcon on the highway was not simply a matter of following the road and maintaining the right speed, but a multi-sensory exercise in intent attentiveness. For one thing, it vibrated uncontrollably between 60 and 70 mph, making normal highway speeds impossible to maintain; this was a defect common to many Ford cars of its era, a kind of automotive genetic malfunction. Like any driver, I looked, watching the road and the gauges. But I also listened – is that noise new? Is it a clunking noise from the engine meaning that the engine bearings are worn or are some bolts are loose meaning a key part is about to go flying off? And I felt. It is vibrating. Is it because I'm on rough pavement or within its proscribed speed zone or is it because the driveshaft is failing? Do I smell gas? Is there a hole in the gas line? Is the whole thing about to explode?

Today I drive a BMW. It runs and handles beautifully. It is, as they say, "the ultimate driving machine. A vehicular tool, it does what I say, functioning as an extension of myself. I feel no need to negotiate with it, I do not feel that it has a will of its own. In it I am alone.

The web



In 1994 I began keeping a web site for the Falcon. The Web was very new then, and I was fascinated by it. My research is on the social use of online media and I had been saying that people would be using

computers for all kinds of social interactions, and that one of the things that they would do would be to have some sort of virtual persona, a representation of themselves available to read and to interact with in their absence. In the days before the web, when relatively few people used email or even computers, this prediction was greeted quite skeptically. Then the web arrived, and people started making home pages, publishing their vacation photos and lists of their favorite movies and the details of their children's births. I read these pages avidly: what image of themselves were people trying to present with these pages? who did they imagine their audience was? what motivated them to write these private stories in a public domain? As for writing anything about myself, I was torn between wanting to participate in this new medium and feeling too reserved to write anything personal. Creating a home page for the Falcon allowed me to participate in the personal and informal side of the web, while remaining at least partially hidden behind its persona.

The Falcon's home page had some commentary about life as a car and links to information that a car would find interesting, other Falcon's, car repair shops, articles about Boston drivers:

Hello. I am a '64 Ford Falcon. My favorite site on the net is the [Ford Falcon WWW page](#). I occasionally read [rec.autos.antique](#), but on the whole, the net is a bit dull. I had expected more cars on the Information Superhighway.

And, anticipating today's web journals, it featured a frequently updated diary.

Some of the entries depicted the mundane daily life of a car:

Aug 4, 1994

Today I sat by the curb.

Aug 12, 1994

Still sitting at the curb. Hope we go for a ride later.

Many dealt with various mechanical breakdowns and repairs:

Aug 5, 1994

A rainy day. Noticed some new rust spots on my left side. When I moved up here a few years ago I was in excellent shape -- people left admiring notes on my windshield. But these salty winters are doing me in. I've got a big hole over one head light and now I'm starting to rust all over. Watched "Wild Strawberries" last night and thought about death.

(Later) Am feeling a bit better. A truck driver shouted "Love that Falcon!" as I was turning a corner. But that's getting rarer and rarer.

Sept 6, 1994

I've been away these last few days (as you know if you tried to reach me). I was in the car hospital, but am feeling much much better now. I hadn't wanted to mention it before, not wanting to complain too much, but for several weeks every time I put my brakes on, I'd take a sharp turn to the left. It turns out several things were not quite right - and now I've got two new tires, I've been aligned, and I've got a new left brake. I'm still taking it a bit slow, but am doing much much better, thank you.

Dec 14, 1994

Winter. Already. Snow and cold. And I am not feeling well. No heat, no windshield wipers, no gas gauge, no sound from my radio. I check into the garage tomorrow.

And others showed the world from an automobile's perspective:

Oct 23, 1994

Went to see "Pulp Fiction" last night. Found it disturbing -- the image of all those eviscerated cars serving as VIP seating in a trendy LA club continues to haunt me. The ethical questions are so complex. I know I've been very lucky, and that most cars my age have long since been junked. But the long slow rust of the junkyard is natural - and something about the sight of those polished, empty bodies bothers me. I know I won't run forever. Would I accept the strange immortality of the theme cafe? I don't know.

Sept 5, 1995

Finally, finally, finally! A trip to the car wash. What a wonderful experience - I love drive-thru car washes, with their brushes and hoses and waxers and rinsers. The pop psychology analysis is that the conveyer belt of the car-wash subconsciously reminds one of the primal assembly-line experience. I don't know if I believe that, but it's true that a trip to wash makes me feel fabulous - shiny and rejuvenated

It played with the questions of online identity. Obviously a car was not actually typing up these entries, but there was a clear personality there. The web journal invited readers to participate in the fiction by providing links for sending a message to the Falcon. The diary contained references to these correspondences:

Dec 19, 1994

Thank you to everyone who wrote expressing concern for my health. I'm feeling much better now. I have a new ignition switch and my heater has been refurbished.

Writing this diary was the ultimate anthropomorphizing of the car. I needed to articulate the car's personality: it was old, a little cranky, and insecure about its appeal, vacillating between feeling like a proud antique and a rusting junker. The Falcon diary made explicit the notion of the car as an independent being with a will of its own; it crystallized what had been an inchoate impression of personality into a well-defined character.

Social catalysts

People in cities and suburbs live in close but isolated proximity, discouraged from speaking with each other by social convention, and cloaking themselves in non-descript anonymity. The introduction of a noteworthy object acts as a social catalyst, breaching this isolation and inviting people to stop and comment on it.

The barriers between people are of different strengths in different cities. In New York, they are low. Walk down the street with an ice-cream cone and someone will ask you where you got it, what flavor is it, did you know that there is place down the street that sells seaweed flavored ice-cream can you believe it? Boston is a very reserved city, its Puritan roots still shaping behavior. If you are in the subway and a naked man walks by and you said to the person next to you "Did you see that?" they would move away from you. It is not a place where strangers easily connect.

Moving from New York to Boston I felt lonely. I missed the casual interchanges of New York street chat, the ability to connect, however fleetingly, with the people around me. Yet in the Falcon, I was in a friendlier Boston. People waved, they smiled, and at stop lights they'd lean out of their windows to say something like "How old is that car?" "We had a car like that when I was a kid" "Hey, I like your car!" Being in the city with such an object is an immersive social experience, it becomes an urban village of friendly strangers.

The city and the online world are both spaces inhabited by millions of people, separated from each other by the barriers of anonymity that are necessary existence within such great proximity. Both the real car and the web Falcon were catalysts for interaction; both were ways of gaining attention.

Age and individuality



In “The Biography of Things” Igor Kopytoff writes:

“In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people:... Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life”... How does the thing’s use change with its age and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?”

A car rolls off the assembly line with a ready-made identity, one that it shares with thousands of its identical counterparts. The car’s makers are one force in shaping this identity, and they spend millions of dollars a year to manufacture an image for each car brand, both through the form of the car and by the advertisements it appears in. The surrounding culture also shapes the car’s identity, by associating it with people who have been known to drive similar cars in the past.

In the 1950’s cars grew big, bulbous and tail-finned. They expressed power, command, speed, the America that won the war, the America that was heading into space, the America that could rule nature with asphalt, steel and gasoline. The first Falcon appeared in 1960. It was designed to be a “women’s car”, produced in response to a new demand for smaller, second cars. The Falcon was modest, a small car, light, relatively economical. It had big round open-eyed taillights topped with tiny fin-lets.

My mother, who chose this car, was thrifty and sensible. Ours was perhaps a sportier model than she would have chosen, with chromed back-up lights and cheerful baby-blue paint, but it was the floor model, and thus bought at a discount. In its early years as it drove us around southern Florida and up and down the Atlantic coast I imagine it was a nice but not an especially noteworthy car.

The ages of a car reflect not only its physical transformation over time, but perhaps more significantly, its changing cultural meaning. As a new car, it has the meaning derived from its form, its marketing, and its associations. It also has the meaning of New Car, of having made a major purchase and of having paid a premium for getting an untouched, pristine vehicle. In a few years it becomes a Not New car. It is yesterday’s style. Maybe it has some scratches, dents, and the remnants of old registration and parking stickers stuck to its window. It is now of a generation of cars that are onto their second owners, buyers who did not pay the new car premium, and they keep it until things look up and they can buy a better car, or something goes wrong, whether for them or the car, and then they sell it to the third owners. And somewhere along the line most cars get more dents, their seats sag, they smell of old food and the time someone got sick. And they keep going, til one day mechanical breakdown or an accident makes them stop, and the cost of getting it to work again is too high, and that is the end.

This is, at least, a typical biography, delineating the stages new, not new, old, gone. Each real biography is a little different. . The biographies of some cars are horrible, the ones that end crushed in accidents, the reminders that these vehicles of status and fashion, these transportation machines, can be deadly. And even the most seemingly mundane ones, once you get the specific stories, are shaped by dramas of ambition and insecurity, of first dates and unpaid bills, of the events set off by a flat tire and the subsequent missed connections.

Our Falcon was well cared for, but cars age quickly, cosmetically more than mechanically. By the early 70's, when we got a new car, the Falcon would have looked a bit faded, a bit out of date. My mother, ever sensible, has no great affection for objects and would have happily traded it in, but my father, who had arrived in America from Hungary in 1957, with terrible memories of the Holocaust and more recent recollections of the violent bleakness of communist Europe, insisted on keeping it. Ostensibly, he was going to get his driver's license and the car would then be his. And, he invested objects with deeper meaning. This was the first car he had participated in buying here in America, and buying a new car was a part of the American Dream. Today, we are more cynical about this, we have been made aware that the car industry has manufactured a cult of new car buying to drive demand for their products, but back then this dream was more optimistic. America had saved the world and it had done this with its industrial strength and economic power and the car industry was a piece of this, a piece one could be a part of by buying a car. So the Falcon was saved from the prototypical descent into the used car category and it hibernated for a decade in the garage, until it emerged, preternaturally pristine and low-mileaged, at an age by which it ordinarily would have succumbed to weather or bad driving.

I don't know the whole story of the Falcon. After we sold it, I used to see it around town, but it has been several years now since I've seen it. Maybe it was sold again. Or maybe the guy who bought it went back home to New Hampshire. Maybe it is still running, maybe not.

The BMW

These days, I drive a BMW, a little 3-series station wagon. I have kids car seats in the back, there are juice boxes stashed in the trunk, along with leftover beach shovels and odd pieces off of toys. I like this car, high suburban version of the Ultimate Driving Machine that it is. I like it because it does, indeed, drive very well. I like it in spite of its Germanic austerity. Unlike Japanese cars, which, like tiny Japanese apartments, have innumerable clever little places to stash things, the BMW has been carefully designed to store almost nothing. There is nowhere to put CDs or your handbag. One little pocket in the door has room for a couple of maps, and there is a little shelf in the dashboard that is to be used to store one pair of sunglasses, and that is it. You are supposed to be focused on the road, on your role as the driver, and on your synergy with this fine machine.

I am no longer married. Since the front passenger seat is usually unoccupied I can just stow everything there.

It is a little car, and I drive it in the company of today's behemoth SUVs, Navigators and Explorers and suburbanized Hummers, little microcosms of fortress America. It's a cute car, sensible, reasonably efficient. But no one would stop to comment on it. It is too common, too new, it is still a commodity with nothing to distinguish it from the many other BMWs in this city. It's biography is yet to be written.

Yet it is not mute, it speaks of being a soccer mom's car, a car that says these kids in the back seat are to go to college, and that the grocery bags in the trunk are filled with colorful organic produce and imported olive oils, and that no coupons were clipped to buy them. This is an unremarkable message in our neighborhood of Saabs and Volvos, of ski-racks and private beach parking stickers. Elsewhere, it is provocative, a claim of casual privilege.

The end



Kopytoff defines a commodity as any thing that can be sold – and “non-saleability inparts to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common”.

We gave the Falcon away in the end. Not because we could not sell it, but because the money would not be what it seemed worth to us. In its condition, it would sell, optimistically, for about \$1500 or less. This seemed like an indignity to a vehicle so personal. Without money, the transaction was an adoption rather than a sale.