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Eastern European Cartoons

Matryoshka Theory

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From a young age, Felix Futzbucker dreamed of becoming a multi-layered entity, or rather an infinitelayered one. Among the friends

and acquaintances of the Futzbuckers, it was rumoured that Felix's first word wasn't "mama" or even "dada," but "infinity," which he pondered day and night, still in diapers and not yet out of his crib, so ponderously that he furrowed his brow until he resembled either a tiny old man or a humanoid Shar-Pei, crawling around the apartment and muttering "infinity" under his nose until he learned other words, as if searching for this very infinity in dusty corners, under tables and beds, in closets and cupboards overgrown with spiders and laden with moths, sometimes even in electrical outlets and the soot and ash of an unused fireplace, under every leaf in the park, in the blue and grey sky, in the rare stars drowning in the darkness of the night, in water in a dirty puddle filled in someone's boot print, in a glass of warm milk with cinnamon, in a bowl of soup with meatballs, in oatmeal with baked pears, in his mother's eyes, in a cat's ear, in a dog's nose, in a broken pixel on the television, in the sunbeam from a shattered mirror, in colouring books, in the soap bubbles on the bathtub walls, in the sound of a metronome ticking on the piano in the living room, in the rhythm of grandma's knitting needles, on torn-out pages from father's book, in pigeon droppings on the windowsill, in the patterns of overgrown silver ivy on the old wallpaper, in the melody of a lullaby, in the twinkling of lights on a Christmas tree and the patterns of frost on the windows, in a flower oozing pollen and nectar, in the sound of his own echo laughing like a spring bouncing in an empty underpass, in the shapes of clouds and snowflakes and the formlessness of morning fog, in the possible variations of toy building blocks, in every bend of a spiral shell, in the elegant and hypnotic fractals of a romanesco and Mandelbrot, inside a

lost cow skull in a meadow in the forest, in the colour shifts of oil patches on the asphalt after rain, in the layers of an onion and the saltiness of subsequent tears, in the depths of a biting anthill and in the depths of his own biting imagination, in short — everywhere possible and impossible, everywhere necessary and unnecessary, yet nowhere he could find it. It, the rascal, eluded Felix, swiftly jumping away just as he might glimpse its tail. Felix's parents, Fumiko and Friedrich, along with grandma Celestina, when asked by the child about where infinity might be, whether it's somewhere nearby, just shrugged their shoulders and suggested he go play. Play... What does that even mean? I don't want to play, Felix would tell them. Playing is boring. In response, they'd shrug again and suggest he watch cartoons, since he was being so finicky. Ugh, he thought, what could be worse than cartoons? Cartoons are for the most desperate. I want a book, Felix would say, a book like mum's and dad's. Maybe there, in the depths of books, between the lines or inside the letter O, lurks the vagabond infinity in the silence of unread words.

Letters and words mesmerised Felix. To Felix, they seemed magical and far more intriguing than the pictures in the same books, as in his own mind, the pictures, just like toys, were far more vivid and captivating. All these artist-illustrators didn't grasp the realness; they merely depicted their perception of it. Their adult, mundane visions, similar to those of other adults around him, had nothing in common with the ultra-real realness he saw and were limited, constrained, infinitely far from infinity. Initially, Felix didn't believe that stories could emerge from letters and accused his parents of making them up as they read to him,

based on pictures — that's what he thought reading was, but when Felix realised that words formed from letters, and sentences from words, from which only then stories narrated by his parents emerged, he stopped eating and spent the whole day in bed, staring at the ceiling, hugging his three-legged, paint-splattered teddy bear, and muttering under his breath, "Deception, it's all a sham, all deceit, surrounded by lies, I've been duped, you're all liars." His parents brought him his favourite food, new toys, picture books, asking what was wrong, but he just brushed them off and continued his mantra. After hours of digesting the shock and taming his swirling thoughts, he suddenly conked out, like his batteries emptied, and slept probably sixteen hours, waking up as a completely different boy. No, he hadn't learned to read in his sleep, as you might think, which would have been a likely and plausible event in this story's context.

He picked up the first book he found and shuffled to the kitchen in his pyjamas. It was late morning, his parents were at work, only Grandma Celestina was home. She immediately fussed over him, made him oatmeal with baked pears, sat him at the table, and tried to find out what was wrong, who had hurt, deceived, duped him, who were those liars, and whether she was one of them, but Felix ignored her, greedily gobbled down his porridge, messing up the table, floor, and chair, while intently examining the book, trying to make the letters speak to him. The letters refused to speak and turned from magical runes, once entrancing him with a mere glance, into stubborn, annoying squiggles, as obstinate and troublesome as he was, according to his parents. After

finishing the porridge, he began pestering Grandma to teach him to read, following her around the house, banging the book on corners and whining, “Reeeeeeeead.”

“You’re still too young,” she said in her crackly voice.

“Not at all,” he retorted, frowning.

Celestina had a whole developmental plan for Felix, coordinated with the movement of celestial bodies and the energetic dynamics of the universe, which was catastrophically dangerous to disrupt because who knows what might happen (“Just imagine!”). She was cosmically disappointed that she couldn’t make an accurate natal chart for Felixl, for he was born on a moving train, so she had no choice but to create thirty-seven charts instead. She hung each of these charts in Felix’s room, the last one right above his bed. “Destiny, destiny!” she lamented. The Sun was in Sagittarius – such a fortunate combination of philosophical mind and quest for knowledge! The Moon in Virgo – hence his meticulousness and pursuit of perfection (“Infinity-infinity! All this is no coincidence.”), but the most interesting was the ascendant. “An extraordinary life awaits him, he is destined to achieve something *grandiose*!” This interpretation warmed every delicate fibre of Fumiko and Friedrich’s souls, even though it seemed a bit far-fetched. Unlike Grandma, they were accelerationists in child development, and when they found out that the child (mind you, on his own initiative!) wanted to learn to read, they were over the moon and Mars and Saturn and over all of those planets and beyond.

“Read, read, read, read!” the child kept whining, and at some point, Celestina indeed had to give in—if the boy wanted it so, it must be what the stars desired too. “Who am I to oppose their will?” She sat next to him on the sofa, took a book in her hands, and began explaining to him how each letter corresponds to a sound, what a syllable is, and how words are formed from them, and where to place the emphasis. Felix huffed and puffed, mixing up letters, saying ‘t’ instead of ‘d’, ‘p’ instead of ‘b’, failing to see the difference between ‘o’ and ‘c’, not grasping the meaning of what he read, and just getting disillusioned by how his efforts sounded, which made him to grumble, stomp, and swear (in silly children swear words only), but didn’t give up on the book. Celestine taught him to trace the lines with his finger, read to him exemplarily, with expression, so he could pick up the intonations. By the evening, though, Celestina’s vision was blurry, the letters danced before her, and she felt like she was making it up as she went along rather than reading, and Felix, dismayed by such unprofessionalism from his tutor, began correcting her himself, pointing out that she seemed to have forgotten how to read altogether.

For a while, Felix’s sole interests became books – big, small, chunky, slim, with illustrations and without. His own drawing album, a world where entities and embodiments of obscure appearances sprang from his boundless imagination into reality through a palette of children’s crayons, now counted as a book too. In short, anything that was a collection of paper sheets bound together, whether blank or filled, was now a book. Was a single sheet of paper a book? Perhaps, Felix mused, it

was just a step away from becoming one. After all, if bound with at least one more such sheet, together they would form a multitude of pages, which in Felix's definition, made a book. Furthermore, if you take a single sheet and fold it in half, or in thirds, and so on, its 'bookishness' increases. Consequently, Felix concluded, even a lone sheet inherently, if not already a book, harbours the infinite potential to become one.

However, children's books at home had a way of running out, and quickly at that. Felix disliked re-reading them, simply stacking the read ones on one side of his cot into towers that eventually began to wobble and lean, requiring his parents to rearrange them more neatly into sleek, elegant "towers". A bookshelf was suggested, but who would fetch and stack books on the higher shelves? Grandma? She was old. Mum and Dad? They were at work. In one of the books, he read about a "young wizard" who lived in his tower surrounded only by books. He ate among them, slept among them, worked among them, which activity in Felix's conceptual universe involved only reading and nothing else. Felix didn't want a bookshelf; he wanted to be like that wizard, with books occupying more space than air in his "tower", for is there a better way to fill the endless void in space and self? On the other side of his cot lay unread books. No towers there, as he read them with utmost immediacy. When nothing was left at home, Felix would become fussy, seeking his next dose, wandering around the house with wide eyes, opening kitchen cupboards to extract packages with letters on them, rummaging through newspapers and magazines carefully hidden from him, sitting on the windowsill watching cars go by, sometimes with

something written on their sides, all the while muttering to himself the read words as if he were that wizard, perched high in a tower, watching the world, chanting spells. There were plenty of "grown-up" books in the house, occupying an entire wall in the living room and another in Celestina's bedroom, but he wasn't allowed to touch them for several sound reasons:

1) They're heavy, you'll hurt yourself.

2) You're too young for that sort of reading.

3) Everything in its own time ("Phew!").

4) These are too valuable! You'll spoil or stain them!

5) You can't take what's not yours without asking.

6) The print's too small, you'll strain your eyes.

Cat's piss, he thought, all of that, every single point. Pure nonsense.

The books in the living room were crammed on oak shelves, pressed against each other as if they were commuters in a rush-hour metro. Most of them were indeed ancient and seemed ready to crumble at a single touch, which could mean two things: 1) either they were not interesting hence no one was reading them, or 2) there was something mind-bending, so arcane that it was buried and sealed within each tome, smelling of dust and old paper, smelling of "knowledge". Against the wall stood a small ladder, but it was removed on the first day when Felix

tried to climb it and tumbled down.

Felix's parents, as accelerationists, were ecstatic about their son's new fascination. If they, two such grand intellectuals, eclipsed most of humanity, what then would their offspring become? Felix, it seemed to them, was an alloy of all that was best in them, not just an alloy but a superconductor, capable of channelling epistemic universals through himself at great speed and minimal resistance, but not just channelling — absorbing them without overheating, soaking it all up like a sponge. He was the child they had dreamed of, even though in their dreams and plans it had looked somewhat different. Felix, if he really was a prodigy, was a prodigy of a different order, *effreno igne*, an unbridled fire, having stolen himself from his greedy holders. To interfere in what he was doing and how he was doing it meant scalding oneself, so their parenting strategy was to not touch the delicate construct of Felix's personality, lest they accidentally break something. That, however, was hard to do, for at that point, Felix was interested in little else but books, making this practically the only way to influence him. Everyone in the family tried to plant their own flower bed in Felix's mind, which eventually turned into a real passive-aggressive Cold War — mum bought her books, grandma bought hers, dad bought nothing, believing two opposing sides were already enough, and he didn't fancy getting caught in the crossfire.

Thus, Felix came to possess the story about the matryoshka. It was the first book where the letters nearly matched the illustrations in scale, a book he read himself (!), clandestinely under the blanket at night. It was

a tale of Matryoshka Masha, dwelling in a grand, ornately carved wooden house, nestled in a bright clearing of the forest, under tall white birches with crowns turned gold by the autumnal leafmortification. There lived rose-cheeked Masha, serene and growing, a beauty, ornately painted too, adorned in a red sarafan. And then, one day, the green and malevolent Zmei Gorynych, a three-headed monster, a parody on a dragon, descended upon her abode! He roared, stomped, and with a lash of his lengthy tail, shattered her dwelling to splinters — Masha barely escaped. Alone, desolate beside her ruined home, clasped she her head in horror and wept ("O woe, I'm done for!"). Meanwhile, Gorynych, his largest maw gaping, readied himself to devour the matryoshka. He bellowed through the forest, fiery breath and smoky nostrils, paws thundering, a true nightmare. But then, clever Matryoshka Masha showed her cunning... She popped open her lid ("Bang!"), revealing another, smaller Masha inside. Gorynych recoiled, crying out: "Ai-ai!" Unprepared for such a twist, he readied another maw, his teeth bared, but the smaller matryoshka also opened up, revealing yet another, even smaller sister. Gorynych, flustered again, prepared a third maw. ("What a calamity!") Out of the third matryoshka jumped a fourth, tinier still! But Gorynych, not to be outdone, sprouted another head, just as vile, gnashing, billowing smoke and flame. Masha knew her course, for her life and essence were a recursive algorithm — from the fourth matryoshka leapt a fifth. Gorynych grew another maw, Masha split again, deftly, without hesitation ("Swarming like midges!"). Gorynych — another head, Masha — another matryoshka. Gorynych — yet another head, Masha

— yet another matryoshka. As Masha's numbers grew, Gorynych kept sprouting heads, until all those eyes began to spin at the infinitely increasing multitude of Mashas. Then, after an eternity or two passed, from the smallest matryoshka of that moment, less than a microscopic, leapt a minuscule, tinier-than-tiny Masha, one that Gorynych couldn't possibly swallow or even see. In short, Masha vanished from Gorynych's physical reality. His head spun, and he, taken aback, perched himself on a birch stump, while the ceaselessly multiplying Mashas seized this opportune moment and started to thrash the monster, heartily, with their ornate sides. The infiniteheaded Gorynych, overwhelmed, flapped its puny wings and vanished over the horizon, while the infinity of Mashas shook their fists in unison, warning he, a demon damned, never dare to return.

Here, Felix thought, here it is — the essence of the infinity, or rather two infinities, one of which managed to triumph over the other. One can but marvel! Yet, with a bittersweet tang of disappointment on his palate, a tremor on the tongue, and goosebumps all over the body, he then decided that both Zmei Gorynych and Masha were most likely fictional characters, existing only within the pages of that very book, but as it turned out later, he had never been so mistaken.

Later and again in a toy shop, Felix, furrowing his brow in concentration amid conflicting ideas, wandered long among the aisles, glancing around. He scrutinised soldiers, dinosaurs, aliens, plush dogs, cats, bears, and other odd creatures, dolls of various sizes, ages, and builds, houses themed on every concept, trains, planes, tractors,

bulldozers, and the like. Felix's face twisted as if he had just out of curiosity, inadvertently tasted a lemon for the first time, snatched from the table while his Grandma prepared dinner. Worse than this yellow poisonous thing were only licorice jelly beans. He would remember that abomination for life, he recalled again as he walked between the aisles, drowning in ennui amidst the surrounding plastic carnival of malodorous nonsense. Playing with cars and figurines of people and animals, typically gifted to boys his age, seemed to him a waste of time, as they were too blatant, albeit awkward, in portraying the realness, and engaging with these caricatured projections was beneath his intellectual dignity. It wasn't how he saw them — it was how someone else did, designed them, printed them on a 3D printer, and now foisted them upon him to play with. He couldn't understand why he should play with someone else's ideas, let alone such primitive ones. Building sets with various parts and no specific instructions held some interest due to the number of gameplay variations lazily striving towards infinity, but still seemed somewhat limited. He strolled for an hour between the aisles, drawing surprised and suspicious glances from the shop assistants, while one of the parents who had brought him yawned near the cash register, chatting with those same assistants, or examined thousand-piece puzzles with zeal and inspiration, wishing to be at home assembling them on the floor rather than enduring this ordeal. And there, in one of those shops, out of nowhere — it stood, a matryoshka, on a shelf, enveloped in some unknown glowing aura (perhaps polyethylene) that magnetically drew Felix. Bright red, yellow, and green colours of intricate floral patterns flowed over her barrel-shaped

dress and flattened headscarf, under which golden curls peeked out. Her benevolent face with rosy cheeks slyly looked at him, as if winking. At first, the matryoshka, not even a toy but rather a souvenir, forgotten in a distant corner of the shop, seemed to him an illusion, a projection of his imagination, a manifestation of his deepest desires in the real world. His pupils dilated, his heart fluttered, and for a moment, he seemed to slip out of the physical realm. Between him and the matryoshka, a tunnel formed, outside of which the world ceased to exist, and inside of which time stopped. The only thing separating Felix from the matryoshka on its pedestal was the unfortunate height, and no matter how much he stretched his arm and stood on tiptoe, he was still a couple of centimetres short.

Immediately (excluding the five-minute queue at the cashier and the journey home in a dusty bus reeking of exhaust fumes), Felix found himself in the living room on a stiff, age-hardened carpet with a circle in the middle and spreading from it enigmatic abstractions resembling a mix of unknown runes, a herbarium, and crop circles. Felix placed the matryoshka right in the circle's centre, adjusted his glasses, and settled onto the carpet, observing how the doll's glossy lacquer coating gleamed in the sunlight, slyly smiling at him with her eternal grin, until he finally decided to pick her up again, brought her to his left ear, and, in a nod to the empirical method, gave her a thorough shake.

Inside, a soft clatter echoed in the wooden multidimensionality and resonated outward, into the hands clutching the matryoshka. Here it was — the whisper of infinity, cascading and embodying everything at

once: the thunder of an avalanche descending in the mountains, the roar of a waterfall, the dragon's bellow, a mother's heartbeat, the hum of city traffic, the rattle of the old dusty bus reeking of exhaust fumes, the clack of a train on the rails, the wails of sirens in the foggy sea and the wails of sirens of police, the bark of a stray dog in the empty midnight, the discord of voices in a festive square, the chime of a cherished Grandma's shattered vase, the Grandma's scolding, also memorable, the echo of footsteps in a university library, the pounding of a hammer on an anvil, the sound of a pike split in two by an axe, the ring of hundreds of wooden bells, the rustle of dry leaves in an autumn forest, the melody of raindrops, the purring of an old cat and the squeak of a caught mouse, the voice of the night breeze, the flutter of a moth's wings, the scuttle of a spider across a web, the creak of blossoms opening at dawn, the crash of a falling speck of dust, a scream in a vacuum, the pulsation of moonlight, the breath of time irritating the nape of the neck.

Once the goosebumps had subsided, overcoming the surface's slipperiness, Felix hugged the top part of the matryoshka and began to unscrew the bottom part with his free hand. A faint creak of wood against wood, a click, and the matryoshka opened. Inside, as he expected, another matryoshka, identical in every way except for size, was imprisoned in a wooden cage of higher dimensionality.

Felix's eyes moistened with excitement, as if also coated in glossy laquer, his hands trembled, and he nearly dropped both matryoshkas.

Now, two of them stood at the centre of the carpet. Simply

unbelievable, a real miracle of human progress, he thought, absolutely identical, what a trick, phenomenal! Having reassured himself that the matryoshkas were indeed identical except for size, he took the smaller one and shook it, expecting to hear the same light rattling of its innards, and, confirming this, he began to open it as well. Unlike the first, matryoshka number two was reluctant to open — the halves did not budge a millimetre. However, this did not stop Felix. He continued to twist and pull, shake and tap, when suddenly the two halves of the second matryoshka flew apart, and another matryoshka fell to the floor. It, as it should, possessed absolute identicality in relation to matryoshka number one and number two, but was smaller.

Felix was struck as if by lightning. A-ha! Tiny sparks ran through his body, finding no exit, and continued to race back and forth, twirling and swirling, flaring and fading, spreading excitement throughout Felix's cranial box, causing him to cry out. It was as if he was pulling the handle of a broken gaming machine, and the result of each iteration was known to him for certain. He grabbed the third, effortlessly opened it, closed it, placed it in a circle, grabbed the fourth, unwound it, closed it, placed it next to it, and so on, continuing the sequence until the eighth one, when something terrible happened — the matryoshkas stopped opening.

In Felix's hands remained a tiny figure, the size of a grape, with barely discernible patterns and facial features. He pulled it apart, searched with his nails for a seam in the middle, tried to bite it open, eventually scratching the entire drawing, but found nothing except for its integrity,

monolithicity, and the mounting, already tapping on his shoulder, disappointment.

“This is the last one, Felix,” said his grandmother.

He looked at her with wide, shining eyes, in the corners of which thin crystals of emotion began to grow - the very disappointment, fear, resentment, anger.

“How can it be the last one?” Felix uttered in a faintly trembling voice.

“They’re not infinite, my dear.”

“Not in-infinite?”

In response, the grandmother merely shrugged.

“You’re lying!” Felix shouted. “You’re all lying!”

A salty tear trickled down his cheek, tickled his lip and crept into his mouth, giving him a second to taste its flavour before triggering an explosive chain reaction in his body.

Realising he was crying from the terror instilled by the finitude of the sequence of painted wooden matryoshkas, Felix bawled, continuing to weep inconsolably for several minutes until his grandmother, bringing him back to his senses, embraced him, red as a like a steamed lobster, stroked his head, and whispered soothing spells in his ear. He reached back for the matryoshkas, took the smallest one, the very catalyst of his

frustration, twirled her, gazed intently, thinking no longer of infinity, nor of himself, but of how he pitied the tiny wooden doll, which, unlike her elders, contained nothing but herself.

Sullen and joyless, with trembling hands and his grandmother's help, he arranged the matryoshkas in the centre of the carpet in a row from smallest to largest, and then it dawned on him.

The world stopped crumbling, the crystals completely melted away, the noise in his head subsided, leaving only the echo of his sobs. Melancholy left, and in its place came bliss, a genuine intellectual pleasure that Felix, it seems, had never before experienced.

It wasn't she, the tiny matryoshka, that was inside the bigger matryoshkas; it was they, the matryoshki, that were merely her shell, and she – the heart of the entire complex layered construction, and if so was the truth, then who was he – one of the shells or the core?

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