



## Grad Student Deconstructs Take-Out Menu

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CAMBRIDGE, MA—Jon Rosenblatt, 27, a Harvard University English graduate student specializing in modern and postmodern critical theory, deconstructed the take-out menu of a local Mexican restaurant "out of sheer force of habit" Monday.



Jon Rosenblatt with the menu in question.

"What's wrong with me?" Rosenblatt asked fellow graduate student Amanda Kiefer following the incident. "Am I completely losing my mind? I just wanted to order some food from Burrito Bandito. Next thing I know, I'm analyzing the menu's content as a text, or 'text,' subjecting it to a rigorous critical reevaluation informed by Derrida, De Man, etc., as a construct, or 'construct,' made up of multi-varied and, in fact, often self-contradictory messages, or 'meanings,' derived from the cultural signifiers

evoked by the menu, or 'menu,' and the resultant assumptions within not only the mind of the menu's 'authors' and 'readers,' but also within the larger context of our current postmodern media environment. Man, I've got to finish my dissertation before I end up in a rubber room."

At approximately 2 a.m., Rosenblatt was finishing a particularly difficult course-pack reading on the impact of feminism, post-feminism, and current 'queer' theory on received notions of gender and sexual preference/identity. Realizing he hadn't eaten since lunch, the Ph.D candidate picked up the Burrito Bandito menu. Before he could decide on an order, he instinctively reduced the flyer to a set of shifting, mutable interpretations informed by the set of ideological biases—cultural, racial, economic, and political—that infect all ethnographic and commercial "histories."

"Seeing this long list of traditional Mexican foods—burritos, tacos, tamales—with a price attached to each caused me to reflect on the means by which capitalist society consumes and subsumes ethnicity, turning tradition into mass-marketable 'product' bleached of its original 'authentic' identity," Rosenblatt said. "And yet, it is still marketed and sold by the dominant power structure in society as 'authentic' experience, informed by racist myths and projections of 'otherness' onto the blank canvas of the alien culture."

Added Rosenblatt: "Then, of course, I realized that this statement was problematically narrow, since I was assigning an inherent 'actual' meaning to the Ethnicity Content of the take-out menu. Which was, in itself, contradictory to one of the primary theses of deconstruction, i.e., that it's impossible for an 'impartially' observing arbiter to establish any ultimate or secure meaning in a

text. I'd just begun to make a mental note of the cartoon anthropomorphic burrito on the front of the menu as a signifier of such arbitrary 'otherness' when I yelled, 'What the hell am I doing?'"

Rosenblatt's inadvertent outburst nearly led to an altercation.



Rosenblatt's analysis of the Burrito Bandito menu.

"I totally woke up my neighbor in the room across the hall," Rosenblatt said. "He looked like he might hit me, so I tried reasoning with him, but it came out all wrong. Instead, I found myself saying that the multiplicities and contingencies of human experience necessarily pose a threat to the tendency of any arbitrary power or 'authority' to dictate oppressive hierarchical social structures or centralize power. Ergo, any attempt to establish hierarchies and centralized power according to arbitrary dichotomies of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviors was therefore not only morally and philosophically, but

also politically problematic, and, in fact, oppressive. Man, did that ever not work."

According to friends, Rosenblatt has been under a great deal of stress in recent months due to the financial strain of student-loan debts, his part-time tutoring job, and a heavy academic course load.

"Lacking proper sleep and struggling to keep up in the intensely competitive crucible that is Harvard grad school, Jon is starting to lose it," said roommate Rob Carroll, 26. "He has become so steeped in the complex jargon of critical theory that he's unable to resist the urge to deconstruct even the most mundane things."

This is not his first time Rosenblatt has deconstructed a random item out of habit.

"The other day, we passed a bus stop with a poster for Disney's *The Country Bears*," said friend Karen Pilson, 26. "I heard him mumble something about the incorporation of previously received notions concerning wildlife and our ecological environment into a reassuring, behavior-validating consumer commodity in the form of aggressively infantilized computer-animated pseudohumans that talk and play country music. Before I even had a chance to react, he went off the deep end and started throwing out terms like 'prenotional,' 'prolegomena,' 'gynocritical,' and 'logocentrism.' I was just stunned."

Added Pilson: "I told him he was worrying me and recommended a good psychiatrist. Bad move, because that prompted him to launch into a whole discussion of Foucault's 'Male Gaze' as it applies to mother/child pair-bonding in Lacanian psychoanalysis."

In spite of his friends' concern, Rosenblatt seems unable to restrain his reflexive impulse to deconstruct.

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"I can't help it," Rosenblatt said. "Even when I close my eyes at night, I feel myself deconstructing things in my dreams—random stuff like that two-hour *Dukes Of Hazzard* reunion special or the Andy Warhol postage stamp or commercials for that new squeezable gel deodorant. I'd say I'm going crazy, but that presupposes an artificial barrier between societally preexisting concepts of 'sanity' and 'insanity' which themselves represent another false dichotomy maintained for the preservation of certain entrenched elements of the status quo and... Oh, God. I'm doing it again."

Rosenblatt is considering taking a leave of absence from his graduate studies to spend several months living in his mother's basement in Elmira, NY.

Asked for comment, Professor Derek Nystrom of Skidmore College, an expert on deconstructivist thought, said that the Burrito Bandito take-out menu is open to many interpretations.

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"The menu can be viewed an infinite number of ways, depending on viewer perspective," Nystrom said. "None of these differing views would be any more or less 'correct.' However, the menu's Pancho Villa-style burrito caricature, complete with bandoliers, six-guns, gaucho moustache, and sombrero, would be considered problematic by most scholars."

Added Nystrom: "To paraphrase: 'What is a take-out menu not, anyway? Everything, of course. What is a take-out menu? Nothing, of course.'"

