



The Index and the Interface

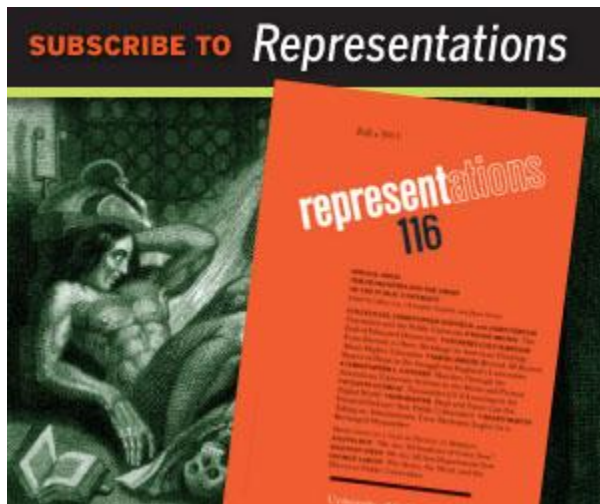
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Representations

Vol. 122, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 83-109

Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.jstor.org)

Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2013.122.1.83>



In this essay I challenge the rhetoric of the “death of the index” in contemporary media and film theory. Rather than being “dead” in the digital age, I argue, the index reemerges as a particularly helpful category for understanding mediated information, “digital doubt,” and experiences through virtual interfaces.

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The Index and the Interface

IN 1996, VISITORS TO THE WEBSITE www.counterfeit.org were invited to take part in an experiment. The site, orchestrated by artist and roboticist Ken Goldberg, presented two one-hundred-dollar bills for examination, one real and one, allegedly, counterfeit. Visitors were asked to tell the two apart (fig. 1). To aid their investigations, Goldberg enabled a series of actions they might perform on the notes with a telerobot.¹ The visitors, now “users,” could puncture, abrade, burn, stain, or simply observe the distant money and see instantaneous video feedback of the results of their commands.² Goldberg’s investigators were prodigious mutilators of the telepresent currency. They chose to puncture or burn the bills more often than anything else, perhaps because the results were so clearly and immediately apparent. A user would click the command and promptly see the robot move and the indexical mark appear at the indicated place. Despite the real-time feedback and the robot’s responsiveness to the user’s commands, a poll on the site reported that almost none of the operators believed that what they saw was true: not only were the \$100 bills inauthentic, the users proclaimed, but the actions performed on them with the very real robot in Goldberg’s lab were mere simulations as well.³

Goldberg’s *Legal Tender* surely aimed to raise questions about authenticity in regard to both the bills and the experience of manipulating them through a digital interface. The project pointed to an age-old epistemological issue that has been reinvigorated in the digital age: as technologies extend sight and hearing, and reach into far-off places, we are given reason, or at least permission, to doubt what we see and do. While a history of doubt in the mediated image can be traced back through Descartes’s window, into Plato’s cave, and to the beginnings of Western philosophy, the recent rhetoric surrounding digital technology and the concomitant “death of the index” in photographic discourse has given new relevance to this debate. Digital technologies, it seems, have introduced new uncertainty into our

ABSTRACT In this essay I challenge the rhetoric of the “death of the index” in contemporary media and film theory. Rather than being “dead” in the digital age, I argue, the index reemerges as a particularly helpful category for understanding mediated information, “digital doubt,” and experiences through virtual interfaces. *REPRESENTATIONS* 122. Spring 2013 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 83–109. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2013.122.1.83.