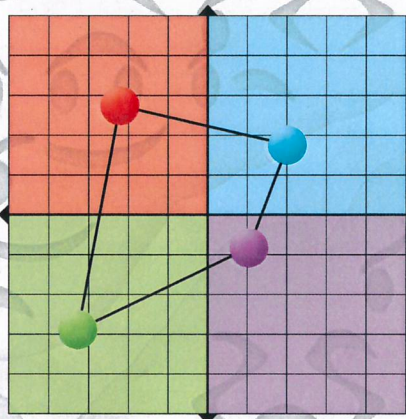Maria Dada

Digital Models: Cannibalising the Remnants of the Map

Angry

Sad

Suprised

Happy

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Maria Dada

Digital Models: Cannibalising the Remnants of the Map

The field of cartography, as the study of the history and meaning of maps is in decline. It is being ingested into what might, on the surface, seem like a continuation of the discipline but in fact is not. I'm referring here to the practices of digital modelling.

I'm not by any means bemoaning this loss. Contrary to what one might imagine, the map is a relatively recent practice dating back only to the 1500. Its lineage coincides with the emergence of the disciplinary sovereignty and state power, what Archille Mbembe might call necro-political power.

The map in that sense is a descriptive performance of state territory. Without a map, the state would not be conceived of as a thing, a map-able object with borders and edges. State borders are brought into being through mapping. The map becomes the icon or as Benedict Anderson claims the logo of the nation state and this icon with its definite borders erases the lineage of its construction.

What I'm proposing here is that it is not that the map was transformed into a digital map but rather that digital modelling as a practice cannibalised the remnants of a dying tradition for its own gains. It saw how effective mapping had been to extend sovereign power, its territory and sought to utilise it. It is cartography that gets subsumed into the emergent field of spatial analysis. However, with modelling the extension of power is no longer bound to the land.

Therefore, the trajectory of the move from mapping to global information systems (hereafter GIS) is not a linear progression but rather a disruption and displacement of the map by the model. In fact, most applications that later become the digital map didn't have a map to begin with. They were created in order to forecast population information for the user by city officials, planners and businesses. The so-called maps, such as the OXAV and SYMAP were complex and had their own symbols with an accompanied user manual that explains how they were to be interpreted. None had a drawing of the terrain or land.

I want to question the role of digital modelling more generally. Digital Modelling is pervasive in most of what might be defined as the digital, from CGI, 3D modelling, models of high frequency speculative trading algorithms, Google's Baysian search term suggestions all the way to machine learning and neural networks. But just like the map the model erases traces of its lineage so it's important to unearth them.