

. I N T R O D U C T I O N .

An 1820s print satirising the relentless march of ‘progress’ is the cover image for this – the seventh – volume of *Vides*. One of William Heath’s series entitled *The March of Intellect* (1828–29), the print conjures a fantastic vision of London. A ‘vacuum tube’ stretches over oceans from Greenwich Hill to Bengal, a colossal mechanical beast transports convicts to New South Wales, a team of dolphins draws a passenger boat, a giant cannon blasts Irish emigrants to Britain, a ‘steam horse’ hurtles into the foreground. The print overwhelms in its strange detail.

In much the same manner, the discourses that have shaped and reshaped our cultures might seem to overwhelm in their detail, for those looking into the past and for the contemporary individual who finds themselves swept up in these narratives. The struggle of the individual to place themselves within the grand, global milieu is suggested by Heath’s brief vignettes of individual lives, each isolated from the other, thus emphasising the bizarreness of their attempted engagements with ever-fluctuating social norms.

Alternatively, these individuals might be seen as exemplifying the logical conclusion of consumer choice or unplanned technical development, with as many modes of travel as there are individuals: a single-person boat pulled by swans, the reptilian wings of the postman, the propeller-driven kite. Alongside these, the vacuum tube, steam horse, and steam carriage convey all ranks together, enabling the judge to leer at the profile of the woman sitting side-saddle, undermining the modesty such conduct was aimed at preserving.

To the left of the composition, in a similar social inversion, the working class are shown consuming luxury goods – a dustman munches on an unpeeled pineapple, his companion devours an ice cream. To add to this, the seller of pet food seems to mock the democratisation of an Enlightenment taxonomy of the world, with her hawker’s call referencing ‘quadrupeds’ – a comment on the emergent notion of class as a way of compartmentalising social groups, as well as species of organism. The image points to how education (and hence vocabulary) signifies class, and suggests both the absurdity of such vocabulary in the mouths of the ‘lower’ classes and the adoption of specific registers in the marketing of products to specific social groups. The print, then, is not only amusing but telling of the anxieties surrounding social upheaval.

Heath portrays a complex patchwork of ideas and threads that find their meaning within the contexts in which the print was created. Only through comparison and interpretation might these threads be pulled apart. His satire of steam-based development provides a framework within which one might, for example, begin to unravel early nineteenth-century attitudes towards technological

advance or liberal Whiggish attitudes to education. Similarly, that Britain's engagement with the wider world provides simultaneous terror and enjoyment might be seen in the anxiety of what one might call domestic 'infection'. That is, as the British gaze turns from the domestic to the foreign, the apprehension of what one might discover in far-flung lands is evident (and, indeed, how these new ideas will 'corrupt' the metropole). Centred in the frame, Heath's fantasy Cathedral, for instance, appears to combine neo-Gothic architecture with borrowed Indian windows and Chinese decorations.

As well as indicative of grand narratives, the print represents the potential of literature and art (and the arts more broadly) to be a response to more concrete developments. Besides being a comment on the risk of exposure to other religions, for example, the design of Heath's Cathedral might also be seen as a comment on the recently-completed Brighton Pavilion. As 'progress' is achieved through the clash of ideologies, the print appears to say, one must be careful not to lose one's identity – indeed England must be wary not to lose itself, through technological advance or through imperial ambition. Such anxieties have still not run their course to this day.

On the other hand, Britain was coming to be defined by its industrial developments and its expansion by trade, settlement and conquest. Technological progress enabled British citizens to reach any part of the world, with military support as needed – all funded via the financial innovation of a national debt, the repayment of which Heath figures as literally a castle in the air. Technology is also shown as the solution to problems created by technology itself, with McAdam's giant steam-driven watering can the proffered solution to the dust created by John McAdam's road construction innovation of the 1820s. Equally, whether the figure in the bottom left is smoking tobacco or opium, the facemask pipe shows engineering skills applied to the intensification of personal interior experience as well as exterior. Meanwhile, medicine is a technology notable for its absence.

This cover image was chosen for its complexity, for its allusions to many threads that have run throughout Britain's history – the individual, the domestic, hierarchical power, the Other. The purpose of interdisciplinary research, and the aim of this collection, is to navigate such webs of meaning by excavating and interrogating seemingly disparate evidence types – literature, art, history, material culture, philosophy – using each to illuminate the other. The articles that follow comprise the interdisciplinary research of students reading for the Master of Studies in Literature and Arts at the University of Oxford. The research is organised into chapters that represent an ever-expanding gaze: how the individual constructs and understands their own identity; how the individual reflects, and responds to, their domestic circumstance and material condition; how social

narratives of hierarchy and hegemony are constructed and resisted; and, finally, responses to encounters with the wider world.

The journal covers aspects of British society from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century; you will, however, find common themes throughout. Heath's print acts as a reminder that, although contexts change, ideas and concerns remain remarkably unchanged – compare, for example, Heath's vacuum tube with Elon Musk's Hyperloop, or the Victorian fear of the steam engine with the modern concerns surrounding the digital age, or even the terror of the colonial 'Other' with the current anxieties surrounding globalisation.

Yet, the print must also provide a scholarly warning that one must be aware of the biased gaze through which we see. The cover design – a plain head with the print below – is intended to reflect the tendency of those looking into the past to impose their own preconceptions and episteme. One must remain wary that the influence of our own times is inevitable. Thus, the intention of interdisciplinary research, and of this journal, is to bring to the fore the notion that there is not one 'gaze' ('Vides' translates from the Latin as 'you see') through which the past or present can clearly be understood; as evidenced in Heath's print, any attempted understanding must be carefully teased from a web of evidence.

Jonathan Perris & Martin Moran