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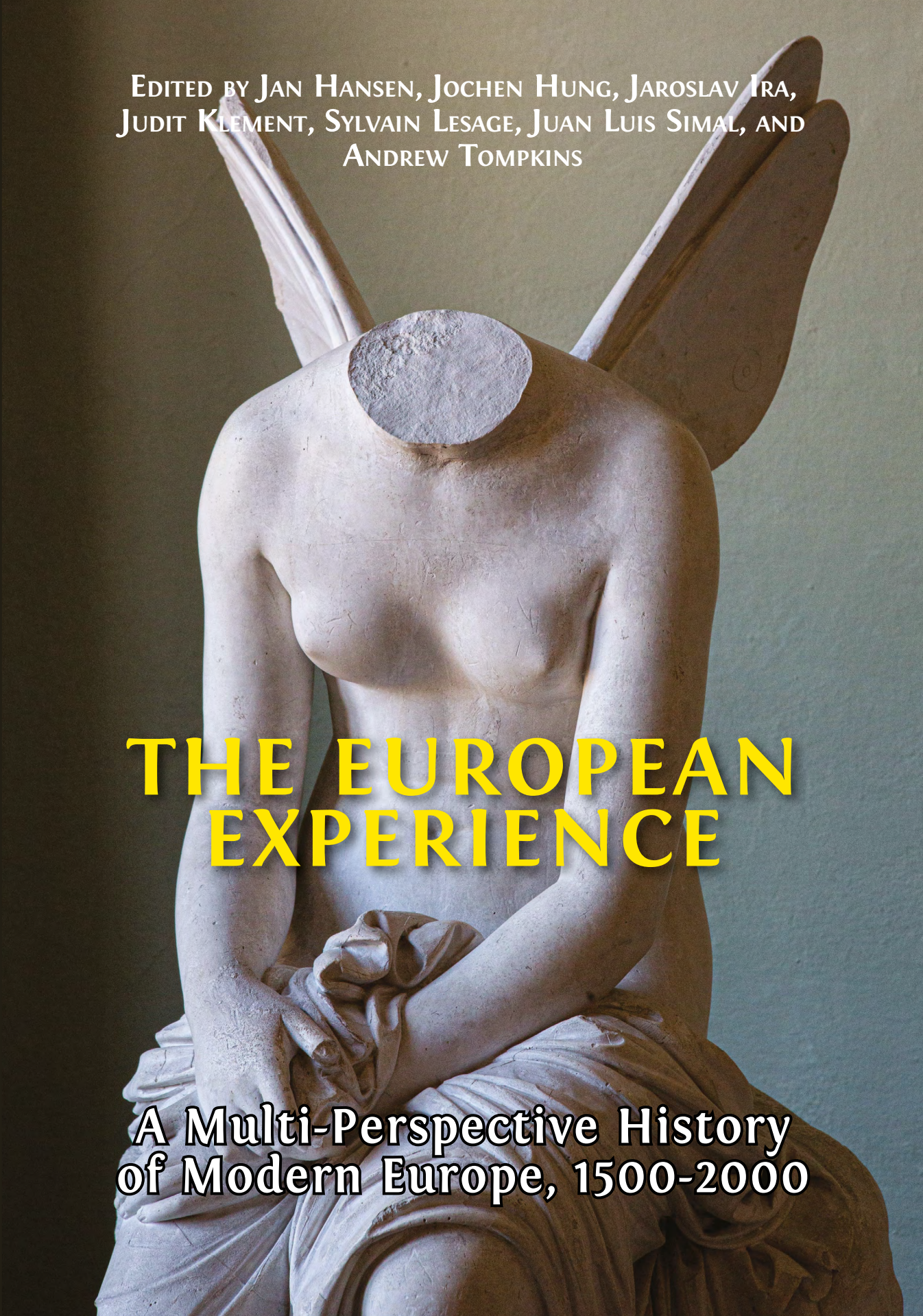

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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7.2.1 Mass Media and Popular Culture in Early Modern History (1500–1800)

Kate Davison, Erik Jacobs, and Mónika Mátay

Introduction

The notion of 'culture' was once defined narrowly in terms of great artwork, performance, literature, and architecture. However, under the influence of 'history from below' in the 1960s and 1970s—and the anthropological and sociological approaches it borrowed—culture underwent redefinition. It came to stand for systems of meaning, values and attitudes and the forms in which they were expressed, whether spoken aloud, written down, performed, or embodied in material objects. With this broader understanding of culture, historians were no longer confined to studying elites: the study of *popular* culture was possible. This chapter discusses how historians have applied this approach to the early modern period and surveys their key findings. The chapter will then turn to the topic of print in more detail as an important source in the study of popular culture, and the only phenomenon that approached the status of 'mass media' in early modern Europe.

Popular Culture

Among the most influential works in establishing the history of popular culture in early modern Europe was Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978). For Burke, popular culture was that of the 'subordinate classes'—those below the elite—and it was transmitted and expressed in market squares, piazzas, taverns and other communal spaces. He defined popular culture in opposition to a learned tradition handed down through schools and universities in intellectual traditions of philosophy, theology, and scientific inquiry. Exclude these from the picture of early modern culture and popular culture is what remains: folksongs and folktales, communal rituals, devotional images and objects, cheap print such as broadsides and chapbooks, and—most importantly for Burke—festivals, including seasonal occasions like Christmas,

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New Year, Carnival, May, and Midsummer. In 1500, Burke argued, this was a culture in which everyone participated, but over the following centuries, the privileged and affluent steadily abandoned it: by 1800, there had been an elite 'withdrawal' as fêtes, frolics, and rowdy rituals were considered incompatible with the beliefs and behaviours of those higher up the social scale. Burke's book, therefore, was both an argument about an important aspect of historical societies that should be studied, and also an argument about cultural change in early modern Europe.

Many of the elements of popular culture that Burke brought to light have remained prominent in historical research, but our understanding of the richness, complexity, and dynamism of popular culture has continued to progress. We now have a much greater understanding of popular literacy, and that greater understanding has demonstrated the extent to which the written word permeated deeply through society. Literacy levels were higher than once thought, especially in urban areas, and many texts were designed to be read aloud in sociable settings, which meant that even those who were illiterate could access them. Broadside ballads are a good example: they were songs printed on single-sided paper, and addressed a variety of topics, including news, politics, or current affairs, as well as other kinds of contemporary interests, such as courtship or marital relations. They were printed cheaply, costing as little as a penny, and were hawked in the streets and pasted on tavern walls to be sung aloud and enjoyed in company—often with the consumption of alcohol (indeed, many of the ballads themselves celebrated drinking and drunkenness). Historians have also found new ways to access the voices of non-elites: court records have been particularly fruitful, as they include witness statements and depositions given by ordinary people. As Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg argued in his microhistorical study, *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), the case of one miller from Friuli in sixteenth-century Italy (named Menocchio) and his interrogation at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition revealed not only his reading habits and understanding of those texts, but also his wider religious beliefs and cosmology. Court records have also been particularly valuable in accessing women's voices and experiences—something notably absent from Burke's account. In early modern England, for example, court records have been used to examine popular attitudes towards gender relations and identities, morality, and understandings of sex and reproduction. Her work, and others like it, has helped to focus attention on how popular culture was gendered, and experienced differently by women and men. The study of material objects has also enriched the picture of ordinary people's culture. Whether tools and other household objects, or clothing and personal possessions, this attention to the material world has helped historians access topics that are not accounted for by written sources.

Festivities and rituals have also continued to attract historical attention, although our understanding of them has become more refined. The practice of charivari, for example, was a form of ritualised community censure—a rowdy, mocking demonstration, which sought to shame an individual who had transgressed community norms, especially those concerning marital relations (an adulterer, for example). These processions were once conceived as a characteristic element of European popular culture, but more recently historians have drawn out their similarities with other shame punishments (such as the pillory) enforced by formal legal institutions.

The picture of early modern popular culture today is rich in complexity, so much so that it challenges both Burke's original definitions and his chronology of change. It is clear that people's cultural experiences varied according to gender, social status, education, upbringing, race, religious belief, and place—whether regional, urban, or rural. There is not one homogenous European popular culture that we can study. Moreover, historians are now cautious about drawing sharp distinctions between the cultures of the elite and those below them on the social scale: well into the eighteenth century, there were significant crossovers of interests, attitudes, and mentalities between those at both ends of the social spectrum. Jestbooks provide a useful example. These collections of jokes, witticisms, and comic anecdotes were printed in great volume across the early modern period, brimming with bawdy tales, rude quips, and scatological humour. Historians once categorised these as 'popular' texts belonging to the vulgar masses, but new research has shown that readers were just as likely to be drawn from among the 'better sort'. In light of these challenges, some historians have questioned whether the notion of popular culture is still useful, and whether we can study it in isolation. Whether historians cling to the term 'popular culture' or not, research into the cultural lives of Europeans in the early modern period continues apace, and its plurality, complexity and dynamism is still being unearthed.

One kind of source material that continues to be fundamental to the study of popular culture in this period is the printed word. The first printing press—invented by Johannes Gutenberg—whirred into action in the mid-fifteenth century in Germany. Thereafter print expanded in fits and starts across Europe and, by 1800, it was a routine part of life, which penetrated throughout society—arguably the only form of mass media in early modern Europe.

The Printing Revolution and Reading Habits

Within the Gutenberg Galaxy—a term introduced by the Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan, meaning the accumulated body of recorded works of Western art and knowledge—the printed written text occupies a

special position. In her seminal, two volume work *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, published in 1979 and influenced by McLuhan, the American historian Elisabeth Eisenstein examines the enormous consequences of the printing press for Western civilisation. Eisenstein systematically explores the consequences of the shift from manuscript to print culture and argues that printing brought revolutionary change in communication in early modern Europe. The dissemination and standardisation of texts and books, and their increasing availability at lower prices, enabled a wider reading public to have access to information and knowledge above and beyond what was possible during medieval times. In addition, printing contributed to the social success of the Reformation, the Renaissance, and also the Scientific Revolution, all of which played a fundamental role in shaping the history of the modern world. In short, the introduction of the printing press was not just a technical development: it laid the foundation for modern Western communication.

Eisenstein's theory provoked heated academic debates, and she undoubtedly drew attention to major and far-reaching cultural changes. Contemporaries in the sixteenth century themselves acknowledged the importance of Gutenberg's invention. Martin Luther and other Protestant thinkers suggested that the printing press had been God's major gift to mankind, through which the Lord aimed to spread the true religion on earth. Luther had been a professor of theology, priest, and a seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation. He also proved to be one of the most brilliant communicators in the history of the West. He did not only want to write for the elite of his time: his main goal was to address housewives at home, children in the street, and common people in the marketplace. He talked to the people, and also understood that he had to listen to them in order to successfully spread his novel ideas on religion.

In the first half of the sixteenth century the number of printers grew precipitously. In the Holy Roman Empire, France, Italy, and other parts of Europe, a network emerged which produced books at cheaper prices, which led to the rapid popularisation of the written word. Owning books became commonplace for many Europeans. At the same time, the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages had powerful consequences for communication, culture, and literacy all over Europe.

In their classic work, *The Coming of the Book* (1958), the French historians Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin examined patterns of book ownership and the reading habits of the lower classes. Building on Febvre and Martin's work, recent scholarship has refined our knowledge of popular reading habits in wider cultural contexts. In addition to the question of what ordinary people read, historians explored *how* they read the written word and how they purchased books. The French historian Roger Chartier suggests that peasants, trading folks, and artisans often had access to texts which had not originally been produced for them: they consumed the same readings as members of

the upper classes. In addition, all over Europe printed materials became available at popular markets constructed for the common folk. At these unique 'book fairs' readings had to be relatively cheap, available through a network of peddlers, and attractive to a wider public. The American historian Robert Darnton has explored in detail the clandestine book trade of *ancien-régime* France, unveiling the forgotten world of publishers, smugglers, police spies, and forbidden texts. He demonstrates how the literary underground contributed to the ultimate destruction of the *ancien régime*.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, literacy among ordinary people grew on a broad scale. Many people could read very slowly—like Ginzburg's Menocchio—and thus read only a few books during their entire lifetime. Most members of the popular classes could read texts, but were unable to write, or could only sign their names. The majority of people who participated in print culture did not read books themselves, but rather became familiar with these texts by hearing them read aloud by others. Reading, as Chartier reminds us, is always a practice which must be interpreted in its context—in space, acts, and habits.

Early modern patterns of reading radically changed in the middle of the eighteenth century, especially in France and England, where common people—including women—developed everyday reading habits and reading became an ordinary practice for a wider audience. A few decades later, this cultural revolution reached the German lands as well. Intensive reading, which for many people (especially in the countryside) had for centuries focused on the Bible, was replaced by the extensive and individual usage of texts. Reading served to both provide information and to serve as a source of pleasure. Reading became an intimate and private activity. Historians characterise these radical changes in reading habits as 'revolutionary' and have labelled these novel developments 'reading fury'.

According to Darnton, over the past few decades, the importance of a new discipline focusing on the social and cultural history of communication by print—the history of the book—has been recognised. Beyond print, during the early modern age, publics had also been created through other media, such as rituals, ceremonies, public executions and riots, religious iconography, court weddings or funerals. In other words, the 'public sphere'—a term coined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas—must be defined as an interdisciplinary territory which bonds together the findings of cultural history, sociology, and anthropology.

News, Politics and Popular Participation

'News' is one of the chief domains of the printed word in which many of the aforementioned aspects of popular culture can be traced. For most people

during the Middle Ages, the flow of information about recent events was limited to rumour and hearsay, garnished with the occasional visit of a government herald. The advent of the printing press brought gradual change to these age-old processes of disseminating information. Between the fifteenth century—in which the first wooden printing presses were installed across Europe—and the nineteenth century, with its massive steam-driven printing presses, gossip and rumour were gradually supplemented with and in some cases supplanted by printed news outlets. During the sixteenth century, pamphlets and broadsheets brought stories about bloodshed, diseases, comets, and other 'acts of God' in faraway places. But gradually during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these one-shot publications were replaced by news magazines and newspapers with fixed days of issue. Periodicity and regularity became an integral part of news coverage. This in turn fuelled the appetite for more 'news' and demand for newspapers and gossip magazines rose.

Fig. 1: Cornelis Ploos van Amstel, after Adriaen van Ostade, *Newspaper reader in interior* (1766), Public Domain, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-24.554.

For most people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the broadsheets and other news leaflets sufficed to satisfy their demand for something new to

talk about. But for those in trade, news became an ever more important aspect of doing business. Especially in the volatile world of international shipping, information could make the difference between profit or bankruptcy. It is therefore hardly surprising that the early modern newspaper—usually a two-sided sheet with the latest news on wars, international politics, prices of goods and shipping arrivals—first developed in large trading hubs such as Spain and the Italian city-states, and later in Hamburg and Frankfurt, the cities of the Dutch Republic, and London. These newspapers were based on the earlier, handwritten news updates that traders received from private correspondents abroad. Now a local 'courantier' collected these letters, composed and printed them—usually twice per week, but in some cases even more often.

During the seventeenth century high-quality newspapers, especially Dutch ones, were sold in bookshops across Europe. They were readily available in large cities, but in the more urbanised coastal areas peddlers would also bring them to smaller hamlets. An eighteenth-century traveller could find a variety of recent newspapers available in a tavern in a remote settlement of the marshy, southern parts of the Dutch Republic. And even if the original newspapers were not available, just as often people could take note of the latest news via local newspapers that copied—rather shamelessly—the columns of others. Thus, the same news became known far across state borders: between 1450 and 1650, an international network of news had developed.

By the eighteenth century some courantiers aimed their newspapers at this international audience. Their French newspapers, often published in the larger cities of the Dutch Republic, were read across Europe and beyond. The *Gazette de Leyde* for instance was read from Washington to Istanbul. Although newspaper editors catered for an educated audience, newspapers were cheap enough to be within reach of the middle and working classes as well. As mentioned above, in Europe literacy was higher than previously assumed and those who could not read would wait for someone to come by and read texts aloud, either in taverns, in the streets, or at the door. Even though print runs were smaller than for later nineteenth-century newspapers, the reader base for early modern newspapers was thus quite extensive. In urbanised areas, newspapers were read from the smallest towns to the largest cities, and by the second half of the eighteenth century most of the people in the Western world had access to the same news about important international and national events, either through the original newspaper or via a local paper.

The importance of the transnational character of early modern news is exemplified by the spread of the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth century: in fact, without early modern news, the Atlantic Revolutions would be hard to explain. People in the Dutch Republic followed occurrences in the Thirteen Colonies across the Atlantic through the *Gazette de Leyde*. That same

newspaper would later inform the French people about the aborted attempt at a similar democratic revolution in the Dutch Republic in the 1780s before it would provide a day-to-day account of the French Revolution to its international reader base. Where news of the revolutionary attempts in other countries offered examples and inspiration, it also heralded the advent of the political magazine which catalysed revolutionary efforts in this period. Beginning in the 1780s, the number of political periodicals in the Netherlands and France—to take two examples—increased rapidly, overshadowing other genres, except cheap religious prints. They offered a platform for revolutionaries to explore political ideas and they facilitated cohesion across geographical distances, allowing dispersed revolutionary groups to coordinate their movement and to reflect on the events in similar revolutionary situations abroad. Because of their regularity, they offered an accessible platform for communication compared to one-shot pamphlets. A letter to the editor sufficed to take part in the political debate of the time. Letters columns in both newspapers and magazines became outlets for political views from all strata of society, barring only the very lowest classes, and thus facilitated the political participation of large sections of society for the first time in history.

News has been Janus-faced from its conception. Its roots lie with sensational broadsheets on the one hand and trade correspondence on the other. One catered for a wide audience seeking something interesting to talk about over a drink, the other provided dry, factual news for the purpose of international trade. Out of these two Manichean sources, the printed news of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed into two forms: on the one hand, cheap, broadsheet-like street papers wherein facts and fiction were often difficult to distinguish; and, on the other hand, so-called 'high-quality' newspapers which collected facts from dependable international correspondents. And a huge variety of hybrid forms in between. News was transnational from its conception, dealing with disaster and death in faraway places, or with shipping arrivals, royal marriages, and political revolts abroad. Print thus allowed the masses to take part in this news and to become part of a wider international environment. This is exemplified most clearly during the highly politicised last quarter of the eighteenth century, where political news, debate, opinion and scandal reached larger sections of the population than ever before.

Conclusion

Print literature is among the best source material we have for studying 'popular culture' in early modern Europe, and it is the only phenomenon that can lay claim—during this time period—to constituting a 'mass media'. Movable type facilitated the connection between different strata of society

and between disparate pockets of culture and civilisation across the European continent and the Atlantic world. By the end of the period, readership had both expanded and broadened. Although the most important mass media of early modern times would be cheap religious prints (especially in Catholic areas), the demand for other types of reading material steadily increased. Novels, plays, scientific treatises, and books on philosophy and myriad other forms of written text became integral to an ever-growing mass of printed material. Readers no longer repeatedly read the same religious texts, but instead looked for something new to read. This process coincided and was bound up with the expansion of 'news'. Towards the end of the period, transnational networks of readers are discernible, and may be seen as a cosmopolitan expression of American political scientist Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities"—vast groups of people who became aware of occurrences far beyond their local environment.

Discussion questions

1. How did historians define early modern 'popular culture'?
2. How did the introduction of the printing press change early modern popular culture?
3. In which ways was the introduction of the printing press a 'revolution' and how did it build on existing trends?
4. Is our culture still a 'print culture'? Why or why not?

Suggested reading

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