

Seeing is Feeling

Revelation's Enthroned Lamb and Ancient Visual Affects

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Abstract

Most scholarship of the last few decades on the book of Revelation has focused on its colonial conditions and heated, even forceful, political engagement, making conflicting conclusions about to what extent it “reproduces” or “resists” imperial ideology. Of particular focus has been the striking image of the lamb on the throne, an image that ambiguously imparts both conquest and victimhood. This essay builds on and steps to the side of this work by addressing the image of the lamb on the throne as an expressive and emotionally, rather than ideologically, ambivalent image. Placing this image alongside other affectively rich spectacles in Revelation's context, I suggest that the enthroned lamb gives voice to conflicted feelings about imperial life: attachment and loss, extravagant dreams of sovereignty and victory, as well as the painful realities of vulnerability and subjection, all in complex inter-implication.

Keywords

Book of Revelation – the Lamb – affect theory – visual imagery – ideological criticism – colonial ambivalence

To the one who conquers, I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself have conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

REVELATION 3:21, NRSV



This extravagant promise is the climactic last of seven made to John's addressees, the seven "churches" in Asia,¹ by the son of humanity in the book of Revelation. While each of the other six promises is hardly small – eating from the tree of life, for example, in 2:7, or avoiding "second death" in 2:11 – the dramatic and spectacular quality of this promise is confirmed by the next scene when the throne they will share with the son of humanity (and God) is actually described in lavish detail. Shining and bejeweled, surrounded by crowned elders, and lit by flames and lightning, this throne is also protected by a kind of hyper-vigilance of the creatures resembling a lion, ox, human, and eagle, each "full of eyes, in front and behind" (4:6). In fact, it is not just the strangeness of John's description of the four creatures that catches one's attention but the redundancy of it. Not once, but twice John emphasizes the surfeit of sight possessed by these animals. Not only do they have eyes "in front and behind," but he also notes they have eyes "all around and inside" (4:8). In the next chapter, however, when the "son of humanity" approaches this throne, he appears not as a human at all, but as an animal, a lamb, "standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:6).

This gruesome image is at the crossroads of a number of contradictions. Not only has the "son of humanity" suddenly and ironically morphed out of human form and into animal form, but this slaughtered lamb is also introduced as "the lion of the tribe of Judah ... who has conquered" (5:5). Seven-eyed and seven-horned, this complex creature arrives at its heralded place on God's throne as a woolly bundle of mixed metaphors. Deeply human but fully animal, a son with breasts,² a victor of battle yet mortally wounded, "the lamb" is, John tells us, the only suitable creature capable of opening the scroll that will unleash

1 The question of the "addressees" is a complicated one, since while Revelation takes on a kind of epistolary form, the fact that there are seven "churches" (or, more generally, gatherings, ἐκκλησίαι) in a book that prizes numbers as primarily symbolic perhaps hints at this as a kind of fictitious construction rather than an actual letter (or set of letters). This is closely tied to the (complicated) question of Revelation's genre, since, as numerous scholars have pointed out, there is no such thing as "apocalypse" as a genre at the time of Revelation's writing, and Revelation includes a mix of different forms – though this is also true of letters at the time (e.g. hymns in Paul's letters). Cf. Gregory L. Linton, "Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre," in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 9–41.

2 On the breasts of the Son of Man/Humanity, see Jesse Rainbow, "Male *mastoi* in Revelation 1:13," *JNT* 30 (2007), pp. 249–53. Rainbow finds parallels between Revelation and Song of Songs and concludes, somewhat unimaginatively, that Jesus' *μαστοι* indicate that he was thought of as the male lover of Song of Songs.

chaos and fury onto the world. The lamb has earned it because he has “overcome.”³

Sovereignty is made available to John’s readers, it seems, through *both* their own ability to conquer/overcome and the lamb’s gruesome slaughter. They have been “purchased” by the lamb’s blood, which allows them to “be made into a kingdom” and “rule the earth” (5:9–10), but they must also imitate the lamb by overcoming, in order to share the throne. But what exactly has the lamb overcome/conquered, one wonders? What kind of overcoming/conquest must John’s readers accomplish in order to share this throne with the lamb? How might we understand the relationship of John’s readers to the very mixed messages of this image of the lamb (also a lion, also a son of humanity) on the throne?

This article will interpret the lamb on the throne as a rich and poignant image that is closely tied to some other expressions in Revelation’s context representing negotiations with pain, violence, subjection, and fantasies of power. Recent scholarship has already productively attended to the violent context that gave rise to Revelation, as well as specifically to the troubling and highly charged mixture of images in and proximate to the text that connote both victory and victimhood. Many of the major studies of Revelation of the past thirty years have therefore drawn conclusions about the violence inherent to, or misplaced upon, Revelation’s conquering lamb. The increasing interest in empire-critical and postcolonial lenses in biblical studies, for instance, has meant more of a social emphasis on the image of the lamb in Revelation, which not only places Revelation’s first-century audience(s) in a larger grid of political power/powerlessness, but also traces the deployment of Revelation’s language and imagery in more recent contexts of power.⁴ The interpretive questions

3 As consultation of the principal Greek-English lexicons reveals, the semantic range of the verb νικάω is conquer, overpower, win victory, overcome.

4 For a sampling of some of the work that has addressed Revelation and its imagery in terms of social and political power and powerlessness, in addition to works quoted and referenced explicitly in this essay (those of Frilingos, Moore, Schüssler Fiorenza, Aune, Howard-Brook and Gwyther, and Pippin), see also John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 191–236; Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (New York: Continuum, 1996); Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (The Bible and Liberation Series; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); David A. Sanchez, *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

that typically arise around Revelation, then, have been about to what extent it “resists” or “reproduces” imperial values, structures, or ways of being. The dominance of ideological readings has in many ways swallowed what is meant by a “political,” or even “social,” reading of Revelation, as it seems most folks thinking about Revelation as political or social must conclude with what the text seems to be “for” or “against,” either explicitly or implicitly.⁵

However, for several reasons I would like to step to the side of ideological readings of Revelation while still building on the truly significant work contributing to understanding Revelation’s social and political context and implications. Ideology is only one kind of exploration of political and social life, and the hyper-emphasis on “ambivalence” in postcolonial theory may speak as much to the impossibility of finding a clear ideology in a text as it speaks to the text itself. This is not a suggestion to refuse to think about ideology, or a denial that ideologies are present in texts, but rather an invitation into the political and social realms through another door.

This other door is affect. “Affect” refers generally to emotion, and while more conventional understandings see emotions as only internal, psychological experiences occurring in direct response to particular events or stimuli, “affect theory” tends to think about the socio-political and relational dimensions of feeling (I choose “feeling” here to signal a mix of psychological and physical

5 Ecocritical readings of Revelation typically fall along similar lines, discussing the extent to which Revelation serves or interrupts contemporary ecological interests, even possibly setting out a new ecological vision. See, for example, David J. Hawkin, “The Critique of Ideology in the Book of Revelation and Its Implications for Ecology,” *Ecotheology* 8.2 (2003), pp. 161–72; Barbara R. Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth’s Future,” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dieter Hassel (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology* (Religions of the World and Ecology 3; Cambridge: Harvard Center for World Religions, 1999), pp. 205–224; Rossing, “Alas for Earth! Lament and Resistance in Revelation 12,” in Norman C. Habel and Vicki Balabanski (eds.), *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 180–92. Stephen Moore’s recent and creative foray into animal studies/posthumanism and Revelation, which focuses on the lamb, nonetheless approaches this image with an ideological edge: To what extent does Revelation support or interrupt a Cartesian humanism, and what kind of relationship between humans and non-human animals is articulated? See his “Ruminations on Revelation’s Ruminant, Quadrupedal Christ; or, the Even-Toed Ungulate That Therefore I Am,” in Jennifer L. Koosed (ed.), *The Bible and Posthumanism* (Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), pp. 301–326, and also his “Ecotherology,” in Laurel Kearns and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia; New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

registers).⁶ Indeed, in affect theory, how one feels is an index of social forces and structures, a qualitative measure of the impingement of those forces and structures on individual and collective bodies.⁷ Affective life is not only a product of history. It may also be how one “senses history,” a testament to the ways histories haunt.⁸

In general, social and political readings of Revelation have mentioned the sense of frustration, anger, or terror that seems to bubble under the surface or rage in the language of Revelation. A number of readings of Revelation, however, have paid more explicit attention to affective dimensions of the text. Best known, perhaps, is Adela Yarbro Collins’s monograph, *Crisis and Catharsis*, which discusses the senses of powerlessness and aggression that haunt Revelation.⁹ Greg Carey similarly imagines disillusionment and alienation to be at the base of Revelation’s violent revenge fantasies.¹⁰ While Elisabeth Schüssler

6 Some who theorize on affect tend to equate affect with emotion (e.g. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [New York: Routledge, 2004]; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003]), while others see affect as impossible to assimilate entirely to the realm of emotion. Brian Massumi, for instance, sees emotion as the naming/containing of affect (*Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002]), and others along Deleuzian theoretical lines tend to theorize affect (singular) as a kind of mutable substance constitutive of social life. Neither for this essay nor in general do I see a need to differentiate strongly between these streams of theory. I find it important both to qualify and differentiate between particular affects, and to understand that there is something lost/contained in that naming. Additionally, it seems to me that while affect itself might be understood differently among these theorists, the very act of talking about affect has similar effects on their writing – appeals to personal experience (the writer’s own or someone else’s), and a move away from “colder” forms of criticism, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and linguistic analysis, as well as more interest in more constructive, imaginative (and gentle) modes of discourse. It is these threads of connection that I find most compelling and that I hope to engage here for the purpose of reading Revelation.

7 Cf. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

8 Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*) is particularly cued in to affect as a product of social life. Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), however, makes a case for history as a felt force.

9 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 141–64.

10 Greg Carey, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” in Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse*, pp. 169–80.

Fiorenza cues in on the “emotionally persuasive” character of Revelation,¹¹ and Christopher Frilingos likewise sees Revelation as trying to guide and regulate the affective responses of its audiences,¹² neither of these readings spends much time on the specificity of Revelation’s affects.

In fact, it seems that while many readers have noticed the affective pull that Revelation has, this observation has been subordinated to, or at least folded into, ideological readings, rather than becoming a space for generative reflection in and of itself. Again, it is not that affect is free of ideology. But the richness of the concept of affect, as an emphatically social and personal experience that can take account of both formation and mobility in subjectivity, can invite a more sympathetic and complex positioning regarding the text. That is, reading for affect can put a limit on the moralizing around texts that ideological criticism often invites. Foregrounding and pausing on affect as a concept entails reading texts as expressive, lessening the burden of their truth-telling. While there is a lot at stake, ideologically, in interpretation, there is also a way in which predominantly ideological readings perpetuate the sense that New Testament texts were always treated as the moral compass that they have become for modern Western readers. This collective sense of the New Testament as a moral index (erroneous or otherwise) suggests that canon, too, has its (often unscrutinized) affects.¹³

There are a few contradictions, however, not just in the notion of the lamb on the throne but also in my approach itself, primarily because of the unusual way it straddles literal and figural readings of Revelation’s images. While I am in many ways following Stephen Moore’s lead in reading this animal in the “neo-literal” vein,¹⁴ I am also departing at a certain point to ask what the lamb might signify *other* than itself. In other words, I would like to take the lamb seriously as lamb, pausing on the specificity of the animal itself, while still also taking seriously its hyper-saturation as image – specifically, its *affective* hyper-saturation. In other words, instead of immediately and primarily taking “lamb” to be simply co-extensive with/representative of “sacrifice,” as much of the

11 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 181–204.

12 Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs and the Book of Revelation* (Divinations: Rereading Late Antique Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 39–63.

13 I have written about the affective pull of the canon in “Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi,” *Bible and Critical Theory*, 8.1 (March 2012), pp. 39–52.

14 Moore, “Ecotherology,” forthcoming. Moore borrows the term “neo-literal,” and the approach, from Rosi Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,” *PMLA* 124:2 (2009), pp. 526–32 (528).

history of scholarship has problematically done,¹⁵ I would like to ask what affective resonances the very particular image of lamb possesses. In order to bring to the surface these affective resonances, I will be inquiring about the emotional life around some concomitant spectacles in Revelation's historical context as well.

Likewise in the territory of contradictions, while I am taking seriously the specificities of the imagination of "the lamb on the throne," it is important to acknowledge that there is some room for ambiguity about the lamb's position relative to the throne.¹⁶ But lack of direct description of the lamb on the throne

15 On a linguistic and practical level, the lamb of Revelation doesn't quite fit the cluster of language, practices, and meanings we associate with "sacrifice." In fact, Loren Johns has found that ἀρνίον, the word used in Revelation, is not the preferred Septuagintal word for lambs as burnt offerings; ἀρνός/ας is, and lambs themselves were not the main animals typically associated with burnt offerings. Indeed, Johns notes that ἀρνίον in the Septuagint is used "exclusively in nonsacrificial contexts in which it symbolizes vulnerability of some kind" (Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* [Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 167; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003], p. 30). This distinction is supported in the language of the New Testament around Christ and lambs. Ἀρνός is the term used for Christ in 1 Pet. 1:18–19 and John 1:29, 36, and this makes sense since 1 Peter and John make the explicit connection with burnt offering (Johns, *The Lamb Christology*, pp. 25–26). 1 Pet. 1:18–19 reads, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." John 1:29 reads, "The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" John 1:35–36 reads, "The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'" As Johns notes, ἀρνίον is used, but in the plural in the Gospel of John to refer to followers in need of care in 21:15 (likely a later addition to the Gospel). While Rev. 5:9–10 and 1:5–6 seem to suggest burnt offering, Johns suggests that this is not the "rhetorical force" of the lamb imagery, since the language of "slaughter" (σφάζω) used of the lamb applies to all kinds of other deaths/murders in Revelation, and the term ἀγοράζω (purchase, redeem) seems to apply both generally and in this text less to sacrifice and more to liberation. Likewise, while many have read Revelation's lamb as the "Passover lamb," Johns notes that despite the numerous Exodus allusions in the text, the Passover of Exodus itself is never mentioned. Johns also underlines the total lack in Revelation of the term πάσχω (which Paul uses in 1 Cor. 5:7), and the fact that even the term "Passover lamb" is a modern term, not an ancient one (Johns, *The Lamb Christology*, pp. 128–33).

16 The lamb is, in fact, never directly described as seated on the throne by John. The lamb is ambiguously either in the middle of the throne or between the throne and the living creatures and elders (5:6). By the end of Revelation, the throne is described as "the throne of God and the lamb" (22:1), but there is no scene that has the lamb sitting (awkwardly,

does not preclude the possibility of the image being in the minds of John's readers. Besides, Revelation occupies quite an unusual space in relationship to the visual field. As scholarship has already noticed, Revelation is both emphatically visual and quite recalcitrant in its ability to be visualized. It exhibits strong investment in visualization but repeatedly evokes descriptions that challenge the imagination. This is what lends the text, I think, to a more "impressionistic" rather than an ideological approach. Like the non-human "son of humanity," a man with breasts who is also a lionlike lamb, images blend and slide in Revelation, both wanting to be seen and refusing easy envisaging, likewise challenging any simple distinction between "literal" and "symbolic." In other words, seeing in Revelation may be less about believing than feeling.

Spectacular Violence and Its Affects: Revelation and the Visual Field

Christopher Frilingos, following a stream of scholarship that has noticed Revelation is a visually invested book,¹⁷ has written an important analysis of Revelation's images and appeal to vision relative to Roman visual culture. In this book, *Spectacles of Empire*, he suggests that, for example, the casting of John as the "Seer," the abundance of eyes on creatures, the focus on the eyes of the main characters, and the appeal to spectacle at every turn in Revelation are all reflective of the Roman work of identity and knowledge production through the visual field. Roman subjects are formed through seeing and being seen, and Frilingos describes the arena, the notion of the emperor as model, the

one might imagine) on the throne. The most direct reference is in 3:21, in which the "son of humanity" is described as having sat on the throne with his Father, though here he is not yet in his lamby form. See the extended discussion by Matthias Reinhard Hoffman, *The Destroyer and the Lamb: The Relationship between Angelomorphic and Lamb Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2 Reihe – WUNT, 203; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 134–52. Hoffman concludes that even the ambiguity of the lamb's position is resolved by the similar status, roles, and authority accorded to the lamb and God (pp. 167–68).

17 See especially Eugene Borling's reading of Revelation's "pictorial" logic in his *Revelation* (Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 35–60; and Harry O. Maier, "Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation," *HTR* 92 (1997), pp. 131–54. Frilingos also builds on the work of Catherine Keller; see her "Eyeing the Apocalypse," in A. K. M. Adam (ed.), *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 253–77.

compulsive displaying of Roman achievements in conquest, and the carnivalesque exhibition of foreign and monstrous outsiders all as ways in which Roman culture produced and positioned its subjects.

Frilingos suggests that by reproducing the viewing relations of the Roman world, Revelation “offers a ‘lesson’ in viewing practices, conveyed by a series of narrative spectators who gaze upon the rise and fall of the Roman monster.”¹⁸ This lesson “was absorbed mimetically by Revelation’s ancient audience, who themselves ‘watch’ as these textual viewers encounter the end of the world.”¹⁹ Frilingos concludes that Revelation’s lamb, which he spends a significant portion of his book addressing, is both spectator and spectacle, an object of vision with a volatile but still present sense of masculinity. Through its conquest and enthronement, the lamb models and inspires a kind of mastery.²⁰

Frilingos’ work culls a wide range of Greco-Roman sources on visual representation and the process of viewing. He picks up not only on scholarship that emphasizes the visual nature of Revelation but also on the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Castelli and Jas Elsner who also frame the question of viewing through terms like subjectivity, mimesis, and knowledge production.²¹ A theme that repeatedly emerges in Frilingos’ book, though, one that I would like to explore further here, is the relationship of viewing to affect/emotional experience. He notes the ambivalence around amazement as a reaction amongst characters in Revelation to the visions that are presented,²² as well as gestures within the text that try to regulate the emotional responses of the extra textual audience to what they are seeing.²³ This matches the larger ancient discourse around viewing that highlights the dangers and possibilities of the affective force of visualization. Viewing made one susceptible, and visual description, according to Longinus, for example, aimed to produce emotion in its audiences:

Every thought, I know, that can be clothed in words, howsoever presenting itself, comes under the common name of imagination; but in a special sense that word has come to apply to cases where, under strong agitation and feeling you seem to see things you speak of, and bring them

18 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 42.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., pp. 89–115, esp. pp. 113–115; see also pp. 76–77.

21 Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (Gender, Theory, and Religion; New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

22 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 50–51. Cf. Rev. 15:1, 3; 17:6, 8.

23 Ibid., pp. 39–63.

before the very eyes of the audience. You must be well aware that the function of the imagination in the orator is different from what it is with poets: its aim in poetry being vividness, but in oratory to startle, though in both alike it seeks to call forth powerful emotion.²⁴

Frilingos puts forth Plutarch's suspicion of curiosity provoked by unusual things like the monster market²⁵ and the story of Alypius' fascination, against his will, with the arena in Augustine's *Confessions*²⁶ as cases in which the process of viewing might overcome the viewer: "Viewing makes the viewer vulnerable to passions better left alone," Frilingos summarizes.²⁷

Not only does visual imagery clearly evoke emotion, but it also seems that viewing has a kind of volatility for this very reason. These worries about what might happen to someone if they "see too much"²⁸ attest to what Frilingos calls the "vulnerability built into the structure of viewing relations."²⁹ One might be swayed, persuaded, amazed – one might have an "improper" response, or lose one's rational mind. One might, like Narcissus, experience a kind of perverse captivation.³⁰ Images possess the viewer, but it also seems that there is volatility in *how* images are received, thus the ancient moralizing on what constitutes a proper reaction to certain visually (and affectively) rich spaces, and the practice of ἐκφρασις – ancient and modern – that assumes that images need to be narrated to be properly or fully experienced. Images do not speak for themselves as much as they speak out of both sides of their mouths.

This volatility in visual imagery, its simultaneous force and unsettled/unsettling richness, has itself captivated certain strands of scholarship on Revelation. Both Eugene Boring and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have attempted to articulate a more open-ended approach to the interpretation of Revelation's imagery. Boring suggests the logic of Revelation is "pictorial" rather than "propositional," meaning that it cannot be decoded into straightforward historical or theological referents.³¹ Similarly, Schüssler Fiorenza recommends a "mythopoeic" reading of Revelation that allows for the reader/viewer to make

24 Longinus, *On the Sublime* 15.1–2 (trans. T. R. R. Stebbing). Frilingos also quotes Longinus, though a different passage (*Spectacles of Empire*, p. 51).

25 Plutarch, *On Curiosity* 520 C-D.

26 Augustine, *Confessions* 6.13.

27 *Spectacle of Empire*, p. 52.

28 Castelli also makes an account of this phenomenon in early Christian literature (*Martyrdom and Memory*, pp. 112–77).

29 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 115.

30 See Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, pp. 132–76; and Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 51–52.

31 Boring, *Revelation*, pp. 35–60.

multiple connections. She explains we should “understand apocalyptic language as poetic language, that is, as opening up rather than limiting, as evoking rather than defining meanings. Only then would we be able to perceive the strength of the image with all its possible overtones of meanings for the writer as well as for the audience.”³²

Even while these scholars attempt to loosen the grip that referentiality has apparently had on the text of Revelation, they seem to suggest that there is something particular about Revelation that is different from other texts in its refusal to be straightforwardly referential.³³ However, both are appealing to the particularly compound quality of the images in Revelation that layer descriptions into mixed metaphors and create strange amalgamations of the literal and the figural, straining the visual imagination. Likewise, both scholars touch on (without fully exploring) what the ancient writers above spent so much effort trying to account for: the “evocative” and “expressive” (i.e. affective) quality of images.³⁴

Applying this approach to the throne description of Revelation 4–5, much of the source-critical, tradition-critical, and contextual work that has been done on the throne scene has noted not only its polyvalence but also its mismatches with any one particular context, source, or tradition. On the one hand, there has been a persistent stream of scholarly literature reading Revelation 4–5 as a “liturgical” scene, meaning that it reflects the liturgy of the early church.³⁵ A few basic problems prevent this from being a viable thesis. For one,

32 Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 186.

33 See also Beale’s critique of Boring and Schüssler Fiorenza’s approaches, which is quite different from mine. Beale suggests, for instance, that Boring “misunderstand[s] the nature of metaphorical language in general” and that Schüssler Fiorenza allows too much openness in her elaboration of symbolic language (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* [The New International Greek New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], pp. 65–69).

34 Both Boring and Schüssler Fiorenza repeatedly use these terms to describe Revelation. I do not see images as “more” expressive and evocative than words, however, especially since language and images are deeply entangled in one another, in Revelation and at large.

35 See, for example, M. H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (London: Lutterworth, 1960); Lucetta Mowry, “Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage,” *JBL* 71 (1952), pp. 75–84; Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); Otto A. Piper, “The Apocalypse and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church,” *Church History* 20 (1951), pp. 10–22; Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, pp. 197–222; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 312–13; Charles Homer Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 117–19.

the work of the Greco-Roman meals seminar has dispensed with the notion that anything like “liturgy” (typically imagined as a primitive version of medieval or contemporary worship services) is taking place in the late first or early second century,³⁶ and, since the term “Christian” is never used in the text, it is far from certain that the set of people addressed in Revelation would identify themselves as “Christians.”

In terms of the specificity of the images in Revelation 4–5, David Aune, also qualifying the context for Revelation 4–5 as “liturgical,”³⁷ finds significant comparisons in (overlapping) Israelite and Hellenistic kingship traditions, and Roman imperial court images. Aune suggests that the hymns in Revelation 5 reflect the tradition of *consensus omnium*, or universal praise and consent lavished by throngs of people on emperors or other authority figures at the ceremony of their arrival or accession.³⁸ Aune’s broader analysis of images in Revelation relative to the throne, however, are less exact parallels than allusions to imperial elements that are also importantly allusive of the Greek pantheon and Hellenistic kingship elements.³⁹ Russell Morton explores the similarities between the details of Revelation’s throne scene and throne scenes in Ezekiel 1, 1 Enoch 14, and Isaiah 6, but likewise finds these parallels more suggestive than precise.⁴⁰ While Revelation 4–5 seems to allude to a temple-throne room, as G. K. Beale has suggested,⁴¹ Revelation’s later statement in 21:22, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the lamb,” casts ambiguity on this reference.

What this scholarly work taken *en masse* attests to, at the very least, is that the richness and variety of visual details in this scene thwart most attempts to finally determine a single, or even dominant, reference point. The reader is left with all signs, whatever their variety, pointing towards a cosmo-political kingship, defined by extreme opulence and amplified authority. This “it’s just like

36 See the work of Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft. Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke, 1996); Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); and Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

37 David E. Aune, “The Influence of the Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” in his *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 99–119. See also Russell S. Morton, *One Upon the Throne and the Lamb* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 111–12.

38 Aune, “Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial,” pp. 114–16.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 104–109.

40 Morton, *One Upon the Throne and the Lamb*, pp. 88–119.

41 Beale, *Revelation*, pp. 315–16.

this, except ...” quality, as I have noted, and as Boring and Schüssler Fiorenza have theorized in detail, strategically refuses any single historical or traditional referent. It also thus refuses easy visualization. Perhaps the extravagance of description, which becomes nebulous or contradictory when absorbed as a total picture, should be taken as a gesture towards hyperbole and sensory saturation. That is, its investment in the visual is possibly at odds with its hyper-referentiality, inviting the reader/hearer to enter not into decoding or unveiling meanings,⁴² but rather into an impressionistic imagination.

The historical resonances, like that of imperial court ceremonial outlined in Aune, are not at all incidental or inconsequential but rather add to and heighten the affective density and force of the scene. Put a different way, the thrust of social or political readings of Revelation has often circulated around defining single referents (Babylon = Rome) and/or, in the case of Schüssler Fiorenza, determining the kind of ideological position the text takes, or persuades its audience to take. But affect is not only about persuasion, and indeed affect can have a kind of unpredictable recalcitrance that often confuses ideological mapping.

Take, for instance, that famous reviled object, the whore of Babylon. Rome as a referent is of signal importance here, clearly, and the very use of “Babylon” means that the destruction of Solomon’s temple is evoked as well. Associating these two powerful and violent entities, Rome and Babylon, creates a kind of heightened affective force. But what is the shape of this affective force? The choice of “whore” is not only misogynist sexual slander but also seems to connote allure and excitement.⁴³ Certainly the later prediction in Rev. 17:16 of

42 This approach to Revelation is most evident in titles like Howard-Brooks and Gwyther’s *Unveiling Empire* and Bruce Metzger’s *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), but I think it highlights a larger trend in readings of Revelation that see its various images as covers for the “real” meanings or referents. This is not to deny that the images of Revelation have social and political resonances in them. It is rather to follow not only Boring’s analysis of Revelation’s “non-propositional” logic but also poststructuralist analyses that see language as productive of multiple meanings, not pointing to a single meaning. This also follows the line of analysis taken by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that challenges some of the affective motivations and sees some ironies in the hermeneutics of suspicion with its aggressive tactics of unveiling. See her “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling*, pp. 123–52.

43 The nations are drunk with lust for her in 17:2 and 18:3. Howard-Brook and Gwyther in *Unveiling Empire* notice the “seductiveness” of the whore of Babylon but imagine Revelation as preaching against, not experiencing the sense of, seduction (p. 180). Some notable readings of the whore of Babylon include Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*; Tina Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in The

the whore being made naked and her flesh devoured indicates a mix of not only shame and aggression but also desire. In an affective reading, “ambivalence” might be read not as multidirectionality of ideological commitment but in its more mundane uses: contradictory feelings. To read the whore ambivalently with regard to affect is to acknowledge her as a projection of not only disgust but also attraction,⁴⁴ the graphic and gratifying image of her being devoured as a complex combination of wanting to destroy and simultaneously absorb her.⁴⁵

The difficulty in visualizing the throne scene plunges one even more into an affective reading – the throne scene is replete with images that are striking but vague. Key details are given, but often only in the fuzziness of figural speech. The four creatures, full of wings and eyes, are “like” (ὅμοιον) a lion, ox, and eagle, with the third creature remaining unspecified except having a “human-like” face (4:7). Before the throne it is “as if” (ὡς) there was a sea of glass, “like” (ὅμοιον) crystal (4:6), and the one seated on the throne goes almost entirely undescribed with the exception of the strangely oblique detail, “like jasper and carnelian” (4:3).⁴⁶ The lamb is importantly never given such figural qualifiers. The lamb is a lamb, Revelation seems to say.⁴⁷ But it stands “as if” slaughtered

Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 60 (1992), pp. 67–82; Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore’?”, *JBL* 130 (2011), pp. 543–62.

44 On the “seductive repulsiveness and repulsive seductiveness” of Babylon, see Moore’s postcolonial work. He sees a relationship between Babylon and Jezebel as threats of cultural hybridity from within (Jezebel) and without (Babylon): “Jezebel and the whore represent two sides of the same (counterfeit) coin in Revelation: on the one hand, an inside that has somehow strayed outside; on the other hand, an outside that has somehow stolen inside” (Stephen D. Moore, “Revelation,” in Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah [eds.], *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* [New York: T&T Clark International, 2009], pp. 450–51).

45 She is devoured by the beast, not the lamb, but the audience still gets to “see” or experience this devouring through the narrative.

46 Johns notes that ὡς occurs in Revelation 17 times, and ὅμοιον occurs 21 times. He observes that these words sometimes “signal vague indistinction” and sometimes “signal additional descriptive but paradoxical information” (*The Lamb Christology*, p. 110).

47 Writes Stephen Moore, “This is not the only metaphoric lamb in early Christian literature (see also, e.g., Luke 10:3; John 1:29, 36; 21:15; Acts 8:32; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 40, 72; Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 7–8, 71; *Gos. Phil.* 58, 14–15), but it may be the only four-legged one. When John the Baptist, for instance, on ‘[seeing] Jesus coming toward him’ in John 1:29 exclaims, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (cf. 1:36), few if any readers or hearers have visualized a quadrupedal lamb trotting up to John. But a quadrupedal lamb is precisely what the Christian imagination has

(5:6), suspending this literal lamb between death and animation. It has seven horns and seven eyes, but the eyes are not eyes – they are seven spirits sent by God (5:6).

This sliding from image to image with little, and sometimes conflicting, narrative instruction for how to receive such images signals neither some kind of existential confusion nor exact agenda, but rather the narrative's affective expressiveness. So whether or not the throne is an exact replica of that in Ezekiel 1 is perhaps less consequential than the question of what issues from the throne. On the throne is an unparalleled cosmic sovereign, ever-living and worshipped for having a generating will (4:9–11), holding the fate of the world (in a scroll) in one hand. This sovereign is a hyperbolic ideal of autonomy and agency⁴⁸ – an ideal with a decidedly participatory dimension, given that the throne is shared with not only the lamb but also all those who “overcome.”

That this sovereign, defined by his autonomy and agency, would be sharing his rule with an animal rings with a kind of Cartesian irony, as Moore has noticed. He applies Derridean “posthumanism” to Revelation, a strand of criticism that seeks to rethink “the human” as a distinct category of existence, especially as it has been cordoned off from “the animal.” While Moore contends that Revelation is not a total or unrelenting deconstruction of proto-Cartesian conceptions of humanity that define the human through agency, dominance, or will (among other things), he reads the throne scene in Revelation 4–5 as a place that manages to conjoin humans to those realms that are typically (in the modern era) excluded from the domain of humanness – the divine and the animal.⁴⁹ The divine and the animal are, he notes, themselves conjoined in this scene through the divinity of the lamb. This is no simple juxtaposition, of course, given that the animal conjoined to the divine is one that

tended overwhelmingly to visualize in Revelation's throne room, albeit an anomalous specimen of lambhood, multi-horned and many-eyed” (“Revelation's Ruminant, Quadrupedal Christ,” p. 306).

48 Though as Aune notes, this sovereign has a kind of “imperial passivity” (“Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial,” p. 103).

49 Moore is drawing on Derrida and writes, “Derrida defines the ‘ahuman,’ which he also names ‘divinanimality,’ as ‘the excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation of ... the human order, law and justice.’ Prior to that exclusion, that foreclosure – which, most of all, is a Cartesian exclusion – the divine is both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic, and such anthropomorphic divinanimality comes to sublime expression in Revelation” (Moore, “Revelation's Ruminant, Quadrupedal Christ,” pp. 308–309, quoting Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* [ed. Marie-Louise Mallet; trans. David Wills; Perspectives in Continental Philosophy; New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], p. 132).

unsettles that divinity's basic hallmarks as ever-living and all-powerful. As Moore remarks:

Forever bearing the marks of death, the Lamb figures the finitude that humans share with other animals. At the center of the throne room that is the locus of absolute power in Revelation is a curious non-power, an abject inability, whose emblem is a butchered animal. Mortality stands in the place of eternity in Revelation's central theophany.⁵⁰

Vulnerability, victimhood, and animal subjection inhabit the sacred space of agency and power.⁵¹

This juxtaposition has been a primary thrust of social and political readings of Revelation, which place the text in the context of Roman imperial subjection, usually broadly construed. Howard-Brook and Gwyther, for example, suggest that the victory of God and the lamb counters and redefines the Roman myth of *victoria* as not "military success and the quelling of dissent," but rather "preparedness to lay down one's life in resistance to empire, and the willingness to live the way of God for the long haul."⁵² David Barr sees the image of the lamb as subverting much (though not all) of the violence in Revelation, which arises as a critique of the excesses of Roman violence, exemplified in the crucifixion of Jesus.⁵³ On the other hand, while Frilingos notes the interruption of the "masculine gaze" that the lamb enacts in Revelation, he ends his analysis by concluding that the throne image at the end of Revelation reproduces the dynamics of the imperial arena, with God presiding as *editor*: "Despite the assurance that 'the first things have passed away,' the 'new heaven and new earth'

50 Moore, "Revelation's Ruminant Quadrupedal Christ," p. 313.

51 Following Moore following Derrida, I am playing on the double sense of sovereign that implies both king/emperor/ruler and autonomous or independent. Moore's emphasis on vulnerability is felicitous. While the lamb in Revelation is typically taken for granted as only a messianic and sacrificial image (and Moore himself still relies on sacrificial terminology), there are problems with these terms. Primarily, these terms assume too much about what "messiah" and "sacrifice" mean in the ancient world. While Revelation uses the term "Christ" (1:5; 11:15; 12:10; 20:4, 6), there was no given content for the term "Christ" in the first century, and it certainly did not have the contemporary implication of a single/singular awaited figure foretold in Hebrew scriptures. Rather, its general implication of "anointed one" meant that it had kingly, prophetic, and priestly resonances, all of which Revelation seems to appeal to.

52 Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, p. 230.

53 David L. Barr, "The Lamb Who Looks Like A Dragon? Characterizing Jesus in John's Apocalypse," in Barr (ed.), *The Reality of the Apocalypse*, pp. 205–220.

that the audience glimpses in the Apocalypse reconstitutes the viewing relations of the old world.”⁵⁴ Tina Pippin reads Revelation as a different kind of reinscription of domination along gender lines, concluding, “In the Christian utopia, the expectations of power and authority are reversed – the beasts are defeated and the Lamb rules. At least the expectations for men are reversed; women are left exactly where they are in Mediterranean society – excluded from the realm of power.”⁵⁵

Whether the usual juxtaposition of the lamb on the throne finally consolidates idealized notions of dominance and power or whether it unsettles them (e.g. by raising vulnerability to the value-positive position that dominance once had), critique of ideology is only one way to approach this image, and often comes down to whether and how one emphasizes either “lamb” or “throne.” Neither the throne nor the lamb, as depicted in Revelation, is an absolute representation of power or vulnerability, respectively, given the “mute passivity” of the one on the throne, and the conquests and violence of the lamb. In fact, that the lamb is unstable in its vulnerability and subjection suggests what might be at stake in the verb *νικάω*. In terms of affect, the lamb standing “as if slaughtered” seems to express anguished helplessness, the terrified speechlessness and incapacitation that often attend encounters with (not insignificantly) both violence and the divine. Is this sense of pained susceptibility what must be conquered, what must be “overcome”? If the readers of John have indeed overcome with the lamb, what about the persistence of that strange visual impression of the lamb on the throne, unnatural as it is, that expresses a kind of discomfort with having (ostensibly) “overcome”? That is, the lamb on the throne, in its central position not only in this scene but also in the final, climactic scene of the New Jerusalem, may not only be a kind of wish to defeat one’s own sense of anguished helplessness and terror, but also a signal that this sense persists, and does so close to the center of one’s utopian imaginations and one’s claims to victory and dominance.

Melancholy Bloodlust and Bestial Suffering

The exhibitionist impulses of the Roman imperium, highly attested in both ancient material culture and scholarly writing, have been read for their affective valences, but, not unlike Revelation, affect has often been subordinated to ideological critique. Kathleen Coleman’s oft-cited essay, “Fatal Charades,” for

54 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 115.

55 Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore,” p. 77.

example, takes account of the rich affective field inherent in spectacular Roman punishment in amphitheaters and arenas.⁵⁶ She describes senses of suspense and excitement, fascination and horror experienced by viewers but ultimately decides that sacrificial expiation of guilt and degrading humiliation of the punished were the overriding affective functions of the “fatal charades” of dramatized torture and execution.

Importantly noting the rising popularity of such venues and displays under Nero and Titus, Coleman deconstructs assumptions of some scholars that this violent role-playing was simply “make-believe” and had little real effect. Coleman claims that “seeing is believing,” and that such dramas not only were invested in realism but also performed the reality of Roman dominance. However, Coleman’s appeal to reality and the realism of public ritual re-enactments – sometimes problematically cast over against the imaginary dimensions – perhaps flattens their affective field.⁵⁷ She thus overemphasizes the straightforward retribution/deterrence and sacrificial models⁵⁸ at the expense of exploring other experiential intricacies involved in spectatorship at such events.

Paul Plass, in his influential sociological reading of arena sports and gladiator figures, sees the arena as a venue of catharsis, but, like Yarbro Collins’s reading of Revelation’s catharsis, he sees the emotional release as tied almost singularly to aggression, anger, and the pleasure of relief. He sees the games as a “surrogate for uncontrolled violence in the surrounding world.”⁵⁹ At one point he acknowledges that “[s]ince what was advertised was a display of ferocity, it would not be possible to watch toughness being replaced by terror without some measure of disquiet at a deeper, less simply entertaining level as

56 Kathleen Coleman, “Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactment,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990), pp. 44–73. Examples of such Roman punishment and dramatizations include sea games, gladiatorial games, historical and mythological battle re-enactments, and confrontations between animals and humans.

57 Elizabeth Castelli’s later work on Roman spectacle in *Martyrdom and Memory* addresses this myth/reality divide with more theoretical sophistication, and through the terms of performativity that were just becoming part of philosophical parlance when Coleman’s essay was published.

58 On “sacrifice” as a model for understanding the function of arenas and amphitheaters, see Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 162–210; Paul Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 15–24, 56–61. Building on Futrell and Plass, see Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, pp. 104–133; Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 129–68.

59 Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome*, p. 45.

well.”⁶⁰ He cites Seneca's description of a brutalized victim of Lysimachus, who had barely escaped being devoured by a lion. This victim of Lysimachus had been so mutilated that he became “monstrous” and “animal,” making him apparently unpitiable. However, Seneca adds that if this victim's humanity was in question, the brutalizer's humanity was even more so.⁶¹

Plass reads this as a testament to the dehumanizing effect of violence, and an indication of the way fear and violence threaten and even eliminate senses of guilt, compassion, and pity. But what might be notable here is less Lysimachus' apparent lack of pity than Seneca's clearly marked sense of empathy for this barely human, monstrous, and animal victim, and Seneca's similar suggestion that such cruelty made Lysimachus something of a monster (or at least “less human”) himself.⁶² Violence, however human an activity it is, sets the boundaries of humanity here in such a way that removes both the perpetration and the suffering of extreme violence into a non-human realm.⁶³ On the other hand, it is the victim's animality and monstrosity that are precisely what ignites Seneca's “humane” sense of pity. The effects of violence on Seneca as witness are not either simply sensitizing or desensitizing, but they elicit a conflicted combination of distance and compassion.⁶⁴

60 Ibid., p. 20.

61 *On Anger* 3.17.

62 I am not strongly differentiating among “bestial,” “animal,” and “monstrous” because while they do not necessarily connote the same thing, they do represent a kind of otherness to the human along similar lines – immoderation, a lack of civilization, or out-of-control impulses. As Timothy K. Beal writes of monsters, “The monstrous is an embodiment of overwhelming and chaotic excess, a too-muchness that brings on a vertigo-like sense of fear and desire: standing on the threshold of the unfathomable abyss, I am aware of myself simultaneously pulling back and pulling over” (*Religion and Its Monsters* [New York: Routledge, 2001], p. 195). Tina Pippin in *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (New York: Routledge, 1999) explicitly connects the lamb with the monstrous (p. 89), and Frilingos follows her in this in *Spectacles of Empire* (pp. 6–7).

63 Moore writes about the complexity of the lamb naturalizing violence towards animals: “In Revelation, then, the death torture of Jesus of Nazareth is figured as animal suffering. Crucifixion is implicitly represented through the figure of the butchered Lamb as an altogether abject death, an utterly dehumanizing death, a death more fitting to an animal than a human.... To that extent, the image of the slaughtered Lamb reinscribes the hierarchical human/animal divide, writes it in blood. On the other hand, the slaughtered-but-still-standing Lamb also represents a leveling of the human in relation to the animal. Forever bearing the marks of death, the Lamb figures the finitude that humans share with other animals” (“Revelation's Ruminant, Quadrupedal Christ,” pp. 312–13).

64 Seneca's inclusion of the detail of Lysimachus himself having survived an almost deadly encounter with a lion perhaps also suggests some compassionate understanding on his

Many ideological and socio-political readings of Roman spectacles in the arena focus on their ostensible social and political expediency. It could be, however, that the “emotionally intense”⁶⁵ atmospheres of these performances are more tumultuous, less consistent places. In one example given by Coleman, Plutarch seems to ridicule the audience for its envy of performers’ beautiful costumes. Plutarch writes,

But there are some people, no different from little children, who see criminals in the arena, dressed often in tunics of gold fabric with purple mantles, wearing crowns and doing the Pyrrhic dance, and, struck by awe and astonishment, the spectators suppose that they are supremely happy, until the moment when, before their eyes, the criminals are stabbed and flogged, and that gaudy and sumptuous garb bursts into flames.⁶⁶

Plutarch, distancing himself from the masses through his ridicule, suggests that the audience has been taken in and “fooled” by the extravagance of the displays, before their “real” aim of punishment and humiliation is revealed. But what if the amazement and envy of the spectators is not simply a veil that disguises the “real” function of these dramas? What if the wonder, envy for the performers, and excitement have functions other than only conscripting the audience into the imperial agenda?

Because affect, particularly as theorized by those with Deleuzian heritage, has a deep instability, the emotions raised by arena spectacles are perhaps not always easily channeled into imperial aims.⁶⁷ Earlier in Seneca’s *On Anger*, for example, he expounds on the perils and destructiveness of anger, citing vengefulness and punishment as excesses, like drunkenness, that overwhelm reasonableness (1.12.4–1.14). He uses the illustration of the arena several times with reference to anger. Once he suggests that the crowds of spectators become childishly angry when gladiators do not seem enthusiastic about their deaths (1.2.4–5); another time he suggests that the wounds gladiators inflict should not be motivated by anger, but by strategy (2.14.3). As Plass has noted, Seneca

part, even while he describes Lysimachus’ behavior through the distancing language of monstrosity.

65 Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, p. 150.

66 Plutarch, *Moralia* 554b; quoted in Coleman, “Fatal Charades,” p. 70.

67 Particularly Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), all lean on the remarkably uncontainable and unpredictable dynamism of affect to do their theoretical work. All three follow the Deleuzian strand of affect theory.

is largely a critic of the arena executions that are given over to bloodlust rather than enjoyment of contests of bravery, and one of Seneca's main points in this work is that while anger can be useful, it is decidedly prone to excess. It seems the arena's affectivity must be regulated; otherwise it risks falling into childishness, passionate excess, and revenge, therefore also risking a sense of Roman *virtus*.⁶⁸

Seneca thus notices the emotionally volatile atmosphere at such contests. But to echo Seneca, why would a crowd grow angry at the gladiator who seems reluctant to die? Is it only a lustful desire to witness a death? Or is it also the frustrating suspense of waiting for the resolution of the contest? Or perhaps it is the breakdown of the gladiator's hope for achievement of masculinity and self-mastery, giving way to a fear that explicitly reminds the spectators the stakes not only of the games but also of values of dominance and mastery themselves. The gladiator is after all a liminal figure, one for which there was not necessarily agreement around whether he was a shamed criminal or exemplar of masculine courage.⁶⁹

In her treatment of gladiators and monsters, Carlin Barton explicitly takes a kind of social-psychological approach to arena spectacles, drawing conclusions about the emotional life of the ancient Romans. She sees these figures as particularly expressive of the extreme insecurities and desires of the Roman age around honor, shame, conquest, and defeat. The gladiator was both a figure of masterful achievement and was conversely imagined as undignified and debased nearly to the point of subhumanity.⁷⁰ Thus the monster and the gladiator are in many ways not just reflective of Roman anxieties and hopes, but also reflections of one another.⁷¹ Barton's approach is most striking because of the way it embraces the emotional contradictions of ancient relationships to the arena – the simultaneous loving and loathing of the games, the admiring and reviling of the figures that performed in it – though for the most part she sees the relationship between figures/representations and affect as compensatory and inverse rather than richly complex.

Her emphasis on the identification with arena victim-players, however, is in contradistinction to Coleman, Plass, and Futrell, who emphasize the

68 See discussion on Seneca in Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome*, pp. 68–69.

69 See Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 33–35; Carlin A. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, p. 152, on the shame and opportunity for valor inherent in the gladiator figure. Frilingos notes that Cicero, Pliny, and Martial all found the gladiator to be a model of manliness.

70 Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, p. 13.

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 145–75.

disidentification of the audience with those who are punished, generally excluding sympathy for the performer as a possibility, since the goal of the games was to produce strong boundaries of insider/outsider.⁷² On some level, this is indisputable, and it was an ideal of the games to create a kind of social unity.⁷³ But this is, of course, an ideal, and on other perhaps more subliminal levels it is important to attend to how games may not have always achieved their desired effect. Likewise, the disidentification between spectators and performers is not a given. Frilingos makes a careful account of the ways arena performances repeatedly loosened and transgressed the boundaries between viewer and viewed.⁷⁴ Indeed, sympathy was not totally precluded from the viewer's experience, as Seneca's account of Lysimachus's violence details. As Barton suggests,

Seneca was, like Lucan, and Augustine's Alypius, fascinated and obsessed with the violence he often decries Seneca creates luxuriant and erotic fantasies of violence starring victims with whom he deeply sympathized. It is a mistake to think that Seneca *simply* abhorred violence. The loathing does not preclude the loving or the need.⁷⁵

Along the lines of this kind of sympathetic identification with victims of violence, Cicero writes to M. Marius, commenting on the vulgarity of the games, that one day the crowds were stunned with displeasure at the sight of elephants in the arena. The crowds felt a pang of compassion, seeing something "human" in them.⁷⁶ Coleman reads this passage to suggest that spectators *even* felt sympathy for animals, but not human beings who were also on display in the arena, because they identified with those implementing justice.⁷⁷ However, the passage in Cicero reads that the audience felt sympathy *as if the elephants were human*, constituting something of a latent acknowledgement of the cruelty and suffering experienced not just by animals, but also by humans in that same space. If on some level the audience sees the games as an ideal

72 Kahl extends this argument, suggesting that the games reinforced the "other" to the Roman self as lawless, barbarian, monstrous, and bestial (*Galatians Re-Imagined*, pp. 129–68).

73 Cf. Kahl's discussion on Martial and oneness (*Galatians Re-Imagined*, pp. 150–51).

74 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 35.

75 Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, p. 23 n. 43. Barton importantly parallels this with Christian writers for whom it is all too easy to take their apparent distaste for arena spectacles at its word.

76 Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 7.1.

77 Coleman, "Fatal Charades," p. 58.

experience of the lawless, monstrous, and bestial other being put into its place and crushed by Roman dominance and civilization, on other levels this stage also invited sympathy (feeling with) or compassion (feeling for) for those who died “as animals,” magnificently or otherwise, in the arena.

Both Coleman and Plass seem to emphasize the de-humanizing aspects of Roman violence. They highlight the ways violence creates almost a faceless, angry, and unified mob of arena spectators (unsympathetic “monsters”), as well as how violence causes its victims to be treated like animals or monsters themselves. But that is perhaps to undergird, and even reproduce, so much ancient rhetoric like that of Cicero, Seneca, Christian writers, and others: Their polemic against such violence may be more aimed at bolstering their own sense of “humanity” and/or civilized natures,⁷⁸ and relieving themselves of the guilt of complicity. This is to say that if violence is a de-humanizing activity, it is one that shows the animal-human divide itself (or the category of the human at all) to be a shaky one. That is also to say that it may be tricky business to even analytically separate ourselves (as consumers in a media-soaked culture, for instance) from the sponsors, participants, and spectators at the arena, or to suggest that seeing has a straightforwardly causal relationship to feeling. As swept up in any cultural *zeitgeist* as one might be, the mobility of affect means that its permutations are never single or predictable.⁷⁹

This striking combination of melancholic bloodlust for those bestial, animal, or monstrous “others” had other venues of expression in this era. In an essay analyzing the imperial exhibition that is the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, Hal Taussig interprets the image of Achilles and Penthesilea that was on display there. Intervening in a series of counter-imperial readings of this Sebasteion which too easily cast it as a kind of “hall of shame” of nations defeated by Rome,⁸⁰ Taussig notices that not all of the nations on display in this structure are depicted shamefully,⁸¹ nor had all of those represented nations been

78 Particularly, Seneca's *On Anger* uses animals as exemplars and foils for his own definitions of acceptable emotionality and behavior.

79 My main disagreement with Barton, in fact, is her perhaps too-broad conclusions on what the arena meant for the “Roman age,” and her almost functional analysis of the arena relative to the ancient consciousness.

80 Taussig particularly addresses the recent work of Davina Lopez (*Apostle to the Conquered: Re-imagining Paul's Mission* [Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008]) and John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed (*In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* [New York: HarperOne, 2005]) on the Sebasteion.

81 Hal Taussig, “Melancholy, Colonialism, and Complicity: Complicating Counter-Imperial Readings of Aphrodisias' Sebasteion,” in Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek (eds.), *Text*,

conquered by Rome at the time of the structure's construction.⁸² It is in this adjusted context, and the context of Aphrodisias' status as a relatively independent and favored city under Rome, that he reads the Achilles and Penthesilea relief, which depicts the Greek Achilles falling in love with the Amazon queen Penthesilea just after he has killed her, thereby defeating the Amazons in battle. Taussig describes the relief in detail:

The Sebasteion's portrait is striking in a number of ways. First, uncharacteristically, Penthesilea is larger and more muscular than Achilles. Her body stretches diagonally across the whole plate, dominating the very muscular and large body of Achilles, who is supporting her. Her posture also seems to indicate that she is still living or perhaps just having died, and in any case, evoking the emotional connection of Achilles to her. Her large head with its Amazon hair and cap/helmet claims center stage, as Achilles seems to struggle to hold her. In contrast to most other portraits of the pair, Achilles is not above her. Rather he stares straight into her face. His look is desperate and sad, imaging not the triumph of the Hellenic portraits, but the attachment in the latter part of the story.⁸³

Taussig concludes his description by asking, "What is this mournful portrait of muscularity and attachment doing in the Sebasteion's ensemble of glorification of the Julio-Claudian imperial dynasty and the submission of the nations to Roman emperors?"⁸⁴ His analysis proceeds along predominantly postcolonial lines, observing that it is unclear whether Aphrodisias, as a city long under Greek and Roman rule, might be more reflected in Penthesilea or in Achilles, given its own relatively strong relationship to Rome. Taussig hints at affect, suggesting that this relief thus represents "the complex melancholy of an Asia Minor city at the crossroads of its own colonization and complicity."⁸⁵ While one of the important pieces of Taussig's analysis is its specific attention to how this structure might relate to the locale of Aphrodisias, it is also worth pursuing the Amazon/Penthesilea relief as representing a broader set of sentiments, especially given the popularity of the Achilles and Penthesilea story throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.⁸⁶

Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), pp. 13–14.

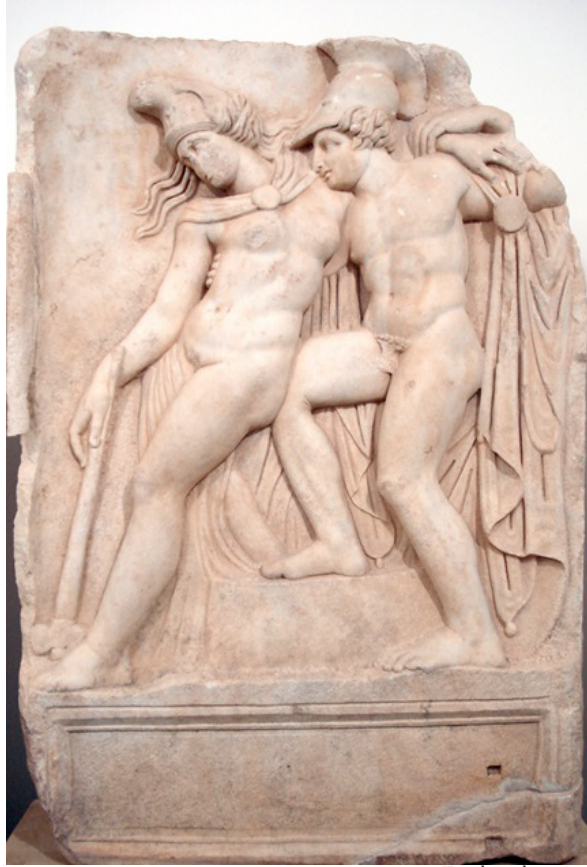
82 Ibid., p. 13.

83 Ibid., pp. 8–9.

84 Ibid., p. 9.

85 Ibid., p. 10.

86 In the Greco-Roman era, Pseudo-Apollodorus, Pausanias, Ovid, Virgil, Pliny, and Seneca all made reference to this story.



Achilles carrying Penthesilea after defeating her in battle. Relief from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. PHOTO: M. KOTROSITS

Foregrounding gender likewise produces an interesting interpretation of this relief. Penthesilea's size on the relief represents not just her power but also her status as a monstrous, barbarian figure.⁸⁷ Part of her monstrosity, it would seem, is her gender-ambiguity: Her strength and success in battle making her an ideal of masculinity.⁸⁸ Achilles also represents a kind of queerness, since he is almost synonymous with vulnerability (thanks to his "Achilles' heel"), and he is in this relief dwarfed by her. The queerness of both figures would seem to be

87 Building on the work of Edith Hall, Kahl explicitly identifies the Amazons with other bestial and monstrous figures who embodied the imagination of that which was outside of civilization (*Galatians Re-Imagined*, pp. 95–96).

88 Cf. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. 105, on the "role-reversals" represented by the Amazons and other barbarians.

mitigated by his having defeated her in battle and by the resolution into a kind of heterosexual love. But noticing their queerness as figures means noticing that these are figures that reflect one another in particular ways, both straining towards masculinity, both succeeding and failing in various ways. What is the affective force of Achilles' love,⁸⁹ then, especially given that it is a lost love from the very start?

One might consider that Achilles sees reflected in Penthesilea, as the arena spectators might see in the gladiator, the possibilities and contingencies of a masculinity produced in battle. That is, he may see his own uncertain masculinity, his own possibility for humiliation, reflected in her, or, indeed, he may very well be mourning the dependence of his own masculine achievements upon her defeat. This, what we might call a melancholic bloodlust, depicts a kind of overcoming of vulnerability that is not total or final by any means. It is, at best, wishful, and wrung with despair. The death of the monstrous/barbaric/animal other imparts not just a sense of allure, excitement, or even horror, but also loss and attachment.

Revelation's lamb merges melancholy bloodlust and bestial suffering in one figure.⁹⁰ As conqueror piling up the bodies of those it defeats, the lamb reflects Achilles' representation as overcoming, or attempting to overcome, a kind of essential vulnerability. As a battle-ready hero who is also an animal "standing as if slaughtered," the lamb is similarly reflected in the barbaric Penthesilea, whose monstrosity and injury are burned into the eyes (or mind's eyes) of its viewers.⁹¹ The warrior lamb on the throne, standing as if slaughtered, expresses not only the pain and helplessness of defeat but also the grief of victory.

It could be, however, that melancholy bloodlust or victory and bestial suffering are entangled further in the book of Revelation. Just as Achilles and Penthesilea cannot be said to be oppositional figures representationally, it seems that those dueling royal representatives of opposing cities in Revelation – the lamb and the whore of Babylon – echo against one another. Both figures are bloodthirsty in their own ways, but both are also associated with royalty – she is bejeweled and clothed in purple and scarlet, he is a king of kings, sharing the

89 Contra some affect theory writers (particularly Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*), I would not describe "love" as an affect, but rather as composed of many, often conflicted affects.

90 In Revelation 19, the lamb and the rider on the white horse are clearly associated in particular ways, but there seems to be a certain narrative reticence to make this association explicit. Thus the lamb as conqueror is kind of shyly emphasized in the figure of the rider in Revelation.

91 The *μαστοι* of the lamb likewise makes it a gender-ambiguous figure in the vein of Penthesilea and Achilles.

throne – as well as a kind of animality. (As Stephen Moore notes, it is hard to define quite where she ends and the beast begins.⁹²) Like the lamb, the whore's very figuration as whore also has embedded in it victimhood. She is, as whore, a trafficked body, a body defined in many ways by subjection to violent consumption.⁹³ This violent consumption is extended in the text of Revelation itself, since the image of her being devoured by the beast and the nations seems, more than anything, fit for the arena.

By the end of Revelation, the whore has been defeated. Given Babylon's figuration as alluring, if also tainted with shameful monstrosity, one imagines her as not unrelated to Penthesilea, and thus having been defeated with an ambivalence similar to Achilles'. On some levels, the text of Revelation seems only too happy to proclaim her violent death (cf. 18:21–19:3). But it could be that Babylon's defeat lives on in this final scene in subtler ways.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the lamb's book of life. (21:22–27)

What is left in this final vision of the New Jerusalem is a surprisingly eerie city. It is a glaring utopia not only because of its lack of night or darkness but also because of its bejeweled and reflective surfaces (cf. 21:18–21). It is a kind of ecological nightmare: a cartoonish and continent-sized megacity with only a single river, a single tree, and a single animal.⁹⁴ It is a monstrosity of its own sort, its relentless illumination both impressive and unbearable. But this scene of rigid, if glittering, perfection is haunted both within and without. Standing at the gates are “the dogs, sorcerers, fornicators, murderers and idolators, and everyone loving and practicing falsehood” (22:15). Within the city, the lamb on the throne, expressive of pain and mute helplessness, lends its own troubling intervention into this victorious vision. The conquest of Revelation is a

⁹² Moore, “Ecotherology,” forthcoming.

⁹³ Cf. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute,” which sees in Revelation's characterization of Babylon not a literary figure or courtesan but an appeal to the grit and abuse suffered by sex workers in the Roman era.

⁹⁴ Moore, “Ecotheriology,” forthcoming.

melancholy one: grief, helplessness, and the reminders of victimhood erupting into its heavenly center.

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (21:3–44)

The promise of the New Jerusalem was always compensatory, but the fantasies of wholeness and revenge that comprise the book are perhaps less striking in the end than its deep if subtle acknowledgments of the costs of victory, and the persistence of susceptibility. Pain and grief cannot be banished from its final vision.

If the throne room scene of Revelation 4–5 is full of eyes, it is because it is shot through with a projected sense of paranoiac alertness. By the end scene of the New Jerusalem, the many eyes are not watchful and superabundant but flooded with the light of endless day. The lamp, the text says, is the lamb.⁹⁵ The metaphor of vision goes from a subjective expression of hyper-vigilance and of having seen too much to a scenario of unrelenting visibility. Books are opened (21:12–13). There is vindication and punishment according to faith and deeds, with special divine scrutiny of dissemblers, deceivers, and the polluted (20:8, 10; 21:8, 27). Clean and unclean will be easily distinguished. The Seer “reveals” what an invisible sovereign, that metaphor of objectivity, sees. Everything is exposed, as Babylon has been. Indeed, by the end of Revelation it seems that “to conquer” means “to expose.”

Between the throne scene of the unsealing of the scroll and this final scene is an intermediate scene in which the lamb stands on Mt. Zion with 144,000 (male) followers, extreme in their purity (14:4–5), and, as 12 times 12 times 100, emphatic in their symbolic fullness. This scene, as well as the promise that those who “overcome” will share the throne with God and the lamb, raises the question of how to think about the lamb’s relationship to readers/hearers of Revelation and their social context. Where do these “followers of the lamb” come from and what does the lamb do for them?

Much contemporary biblical scholarship on Revelation cites very particular economic and social sources for Revelation’s pain, anger, disillusionment, and intense desire for vindication. Some of these (often overlapping) sources are the imperial cult or religion, intense economic disparity and/or exploitation in the Roman Empire, apparent persecution of Christians, the annihilation of

⁹⁵ Similarly in 22:5, the Lord God is their light.

Jerusalem in the Jewish War, and social disputes between Jews or between Jews and non-Jews. The strength and detail of this scholarship on the whole has made convincing cases for each of these as a significant part of Revelation's context, and the importance of such scholarly reconstructions resides particularly in their ability to notice how Revelation could have resonated deeply with those who read/heard it in the late first and early second century.

Social and ideological readings of Revelation, however, have been largely focused on the positionalities apparently implied by the text. In other words, as I have suggested above, conclusions about Revelation tend to circulate around the text's apparent social location or political stance. As crucial as this work is, it has its limits as a dominant or sole way of understanding the implications of the text, and there may be other, less teleological ways to consider how Revelation does its work and for whom it might be working.⁹⁶

In contrast, reading the lamb on the throne as an expressive image retains its complexity and ambiguity, not to mention its wild range of possible political efficacy. It does not "solve" the problem of what the image means as much as chart a phenomenology of its possible dynamic impactfulness. It seems that the lamb on the throne expresses, reflects, and produces particular kinds of pained vision, as well as a heightened desire to expose the source of that pain.

96 The question of social context and affect is indeed a complex one. As Adela Yarbro Collins has noticed, perceived levels of oppression do not always correlate easily to lived circumstances (or at least in quantifiable ways), and similarly extreme disillusionment can be experienced by people in wildly divergent social locations (*Crisis and Catharsis*, pp. 104–106). Yet her use of the term "catharsis" and her mode of analysis indicate a purgation model of emotion, in which emotions are "had" (reactively) and then "released." Recent developments in affect theory have, however, challenged this model, theorizing affect as not only open to social contingencies and construction, but also as part of those very contingencies and constructions themselves. I am also at odds with Yarbro Collins's notion that Revelation's dualistic framework "made feelings which were probably latent, vague, complex, and ambiguous explicit, conscious and simple" (*ibid.*, p. 160). Rather, I am suggesting that Revelation's imagery manages to hold multiple and conflicted expressions of grief, power, and loss, among other things. "Emotions," in other words, do not arise as a natural internal response or by deflection. As Ahmed observes, on the one hand affect can "stick" to people and things, naturalizing itself and *seeming* simply reactive, and on the other it is wildly transferable, almost "contagious," and sticking people together (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 1–19). As I have emphasized in this article, the "stickiness" of affect may be shaping, but it is not determinative of one's experience of an object. Another dynamic of affect is its unpredictability. It is not compatible with straightforward models of cause and effect, and it is full of contradiction and conflict. We do not always know why it is we feel certain things, and even when we think we know the ostensible causes of our emotions, the unconscious means that this kind of self-presence is elusive.

Readers of Revelation feel with and for the lamb, following it in its ambivalent ascent to Mt. Zion, claiming the seat of sovereignty in a move that is, through the lamb, inextricably linked with vulnerability, dependence, and pain. If sovereignty is the desire of the mournful human animal at odds with itself, then to follow an animal synonymous with vulnerability towards sovereignty is surely an acknowledgment (backhanded, at least) of the strangeness of this desire in the first place. The lamb denaturalizes sovereignty at the moment it claims it, making sovereignty perhaps even more prone to extravagant and impossible imaginations, but also bringing a very untidy knot of contradictory affects along with it.

To be vulnerable is to be or to feel exposed, and so the exposed lamb sits with an exposing and enviably invisible sovereign – the suffering lamb becomes an insufferable lamp – bringing the readers of Revelation into a theater of affect for which ideological aims cannot fully account. After all, the satisfaction of Babylon's defeat is ever haunted by a melancholic, injured, and injuring attachment to her that, as the central place of the slaughtered lamb in the New Jerusalem signals, is not ever finally overcome. Thus by Revelation's end, it is not simply angry or proud comeuppance but also guilt, shame, helplessness, and despair that live on, alongside the divine, in the city of purity and ceaseless light.