Christopher Frilingos’s book offers a new perspective on Revelation by rereading its visions through the lens of the Roman Empire’s spectacles, focusing on the audience’s gazes on threatening others. His approach is, among other things, informed by Michel Foucault’s focus on the production of knowledge, Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism,” implying that having knowledge of the “Other” means having authority over it, and Homi K. Bhabha’s theory about the ambivalence of power relations in an imperial context as well as colonial mimicry. Frilingos is not interested in yet another take on the circumstances that motivated John of Patmos to write his work. He aims at reading it as a cultural product of the Roman Empire, linking it to ancient preoccupations with viewing and constructions of masculinity. “Monsters” in the subtitle refers to the book’s major evil characters and “martyrs,” deriving from the Greek martys “witness” mainly to the narrative’s examples of viewing.

Chapter 2 starts with a survey of interconnections between visual images and identities in the Roman Empire, taking Paul Zanker’s discussion of the Ara Pacis frieze that displays Augustus’s peaceful role for the world as point of departure. The emperor was very much present in the East, as is apparent from the more than eighty cities in Asia Minor that by roughly 50 C.E. had Sebastoi, priests of the “emperors past and present.” The Sebasteion complex at Aphrodisias, discovered in 1979, constructs a visual language of power and
integrated the local authorities with the emperor’s rule. It also distinguished victorious Rome from the barbarian peoples on the fringes of the empire. The chapter also offers a sketch of spectacles in the Roman world, gladiatorial contests, animal hunts, and executions, in which Frilingos emphasizes that the boundary between viewer and viewed was constantly crossed. Romans and Greeks participated in the production of knowledge through spectacles, that is, knowledge about the empire as well as knowledge about themselves as subjects of the empire.

Revelation privileges sight with its visions full of curious details and countless spectators (ch. 3). Building on Harry O. Maier’s work on Jewish and Christian apocalypses Frilingos reads Revelation as a textual theater in which the audience is invited to identify with certain characters. His main point here is that Revelation engages the audience in imperial viewing by displaying Rome as the “Other” and reversing the power relations of the imperial cult. He substantiates this reading by offering a literary context for this imperial viewing in surveys of Phlegon of Tralles’s Book of Marvels, the art of detailed description (ekphrasis) and the ancient novel. He suggests that Revelation shares a “sustained dynamic between extratextual audience, narrative spectator, and narrative spectacle” with such literary sources (49). He elaborates this in short case studies of the two witnesses in Rev 11, the two beasts of Rev 12–13 and the judgment of Babylon in Rev 17–18, suggesting that the display of these curiosities evokes ambiguities and triggers divergent emotional responses among the narrative spectators.

Chapter 4 focuses on sexual viewing and gender constructions by applying the “penetration grid” to Revelation. Building on the work of Foucault, Kate Cooper, Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus, and others, Frilingos suggests that a major transformation in the main character of the Lamb “as if slain” is constructed along the visual lines of penetration and being penetrated. The Lamb switches from a feminine character—being displayed as a pierced and bloody body—into a masculine character defined by virile deeds of exacting divine vengeance and a superior gaze (Rev 1:7; 14:9–10). The upbeat to this reading is his discussion of the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe, which in his view is about the performance of manhood as a cultural problem.

Chapter 5 deals with the viewer’s vulnerability. Revelation’s Lamb character is ambivalent, like other figures under the Roman Empire, because it destabilizes the categories of penetrator and penetrated, masculine and feminine, viewer and viewed. The dragon, the two beasts, and Babylon become feminized because they lack self-control and sustain injuries by penetration. In this way Rome is represented as a foreign and feminine creature, exposed for penetration. The woman Babylon, riding the beast (Rev 17:3), displays Rome as an impotent and feminine power, which is conquered in a way a prostitute is sometimes raped. Some of the spectators of this vision are unmanned too,
having their lack of self-control unveiled (Rev 17:2; 18:2, 9). They mourn over Babylon’s demise (Rev 18:9, 11, 15) and “stand far off, in fear of her torment” (Rev 18:10, 15 and not 8:9, 15, as suggested on page 107).

Frilingos’s monograph is a fascinating plea for a new reading of Revelation’s visual aspects. It is informative about various aspects of visual culture in the Roman Empire. His contextualization of Revelation by co-reading the work with Greco-Roman sources and Jewish and Christian martyrdoms offers a fresh perspective indeed. Sometimes I wondered whether Frilingos is trying to make Revelation fit the patterns he observes in Greco-Roman culture. To give one example, Revelation does participate, of course, in gender constructions and also shows a misogynist trend in my opinion, but I hesitate whether the “penetration grid” is a helpful tool to interpret passages in Revelation. Seeing the followers of the beast with a mark on their foreheads and hands in Rev 14:9-10 as penetrated (80) might be an overinterpretation, and Frilingos’s suggestion that the woman Babylon was riding the beast (Rev 17:3) triggers associations with a caricature of a woman (perhaps Cleopatra) on a Roman terracotta lamp from 40–80 C.E. riding a crocodile with a huge human phallus (British Museum GR 1865.11-18.249, Lamp Q 900; see Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, eds, Cleopatra of Egypt From History to Myth [London: British Museum Press, 2001], 337), but it is doubtful whether such associations are justified. The depiction of the woman in Revelation is very different from this overtly erotic scene on the lamp. Although she is characterized as a prostitute, there is no eroticism in Revelation, and the text clearly says that the woman was sitting on the beast, not riding it. More important, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so hopefully Frilingos or somebody else will follow on his plea and apply his approach systematically to the entire book of Revelation by writing a commentary on the book’s visual aspects.