Visual representations of the war have played a prominent role in shaping public perceptions of the United States’s invasion and occupation of Iraq. The initial, much celebrated image widely used to represent the war in Iraq was the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad soon after the invasion. The second image, also one of high drama and spectacle, portrayed President Bush in full flight gear after landing on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln. The scripted photo-op included a banner behind the president proclaiming “Mission Accomplished.” The mainstream media gladly seized upon the first image since it reinforced the presuppositions that the invasion was a justified response to the hyped-up threat of Saddam’s regime and that his fall was the outcome of an extension of American democracy and an affirmation of America’s role as a beneficent empire animated by “the use of military power to shape the world according to American interests and values.” The second image fed into the scripted representations of Bush as a “tough,” even virile, leader who had taken on the garb of a Hollywood warrior determined to protect the United States from terrorists and to bring the war in Iraq to a quick and successful conclusion. The narrow ideological field that framed these images in the American media proved impervious to dissenting views, exhibiting a disregard for accurate or critical reporting as well as indifference to fulfilling the media’s traditional role as a fourth estate, as guardians of democracy and defenders of the public interest. Slavishly reporting the war as if they were on the Pentagon payroll, the dominant media rarely called into question the Bush administration’s reasons for going to war or its profound implications for domestic and foreign policy, let alone the impact the war was to have on the Iraqi people.

In the spring of 2004, a new set of images challenged the mythic representations of the U.S. invasion: hundreds of gruesome photographs and videos documenting the torture, sexual humiliation, and abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib. They were first broadcast on the television series 60 Minutes II, and later leaked to the press, becoming something of a nightly feature in the weeks and months that ensued. Abu Ghraib prison was one of the most notorious sites used by the
deposed Hussein regime to inflict unspeakable horrors on those Iraqis considered disposable for various political reasons, its use by Americans now ironically reinforcing the growing perception in the Arab world that one tyrant had simply replaced another. In sharp contrast to the all-too-familiar and officially sanctioned images of good-hearted and stalwart American soldiers patrolling dangerous Iraqi neighborhoods, caring for wounded soldiers, or passing out candy to young Iraqi children, the newly discovered photos depicted Iraqi detainees being humiliated and assaulted. The success of the American invasion was soon recast by a number of sadistic images, including now infamous photos depicting the insipid, grinning faces of Specialist Charles A. Graner and Pfc. Lynndie R. England flashing a thumbs-up behind a pyramid of seven naked detainees; a kneeling inmate posing as if he is performing oral sex on another hooded male detainee; a terrified male Iraqi inmate trying to ward off an attack dog being handled by American soldiers; and a U.S. soldier grinning next to the body of a dead inmate packed in ice. One of the most haunting images depicted a hooded man standing on a box, with his arms outstretched in Christ-like fashion, electric wires attached to his hands and penis, and another revealed a smiling England holding a leash attached to a naked Iraqi man lying on the floor of the prison. The sheer horror of these images has led some commentators to invoke comparisons with the photographs of lynched black men and women in the American South and the treatment of Jews in Nazi death camps. Susan Sontag, however, points out a difference between images of atrocities from World War II, which rarely show Nazi executioners with their victims, and the photos from Abu Ghraib, in which American soldiers are not only present, but appear gleeful as they orchestrate and observe the suffering of the prisoners. Like Oscar Wilde’s infamous picture of Dorian Gray, the portrait of American patriotism was irrevocably transformed into the opposite of the ideal image it sought to present to the world. The fight for Iraqi hearts and minds was now irreparably damaged as the war on terror appeared to produce only more terror, mimicking the very crimes it claimed to have eliminated.

Sontag has argued that photographs lay down the “tracks for how important conflicts are judged and remembered.” But at the same time, she insists that photographs are never transparent, never autonomously existing outside of the “taint of artistry or ideology.” The primary meaning of photographic images resides neither in the unique vision of their producer nor in the reality they attempt to capture. Rather, representations privilege those who have some control over self-representation, and they are largely framed within dominant modes of intelligibility. Lacking any guaranteed meaning, the photographs of Abu Ghraib prison abuse exist within a complex of shifting mediations that are material, historical, social, ideological, and psychological in nature. This is not to suggest that the photographs do not record reality, as much as to insist that how we render that reality meaningful can only be understood as part of a broader engagement with questions of ethics, ideology, and politics and their intersection with various dynamics of power. Reading the Abu Ghraib photographs and rendering them intelligible is then both a form of cultural production and a form of public pedagogy.

The pictures of torture at Abu Ghraib prison circulate as a form of public pedagogy not only because they register the traces of racial and cultural mythologies such as American triumphalism over evil, over terrorists, and the West over East—which