Renowned for his work on visual culture and the Pictorial Turn, in “The Abu Ghraib Archive,” W. J. T. Mitchell incisively positions discourses on the meaning of terror and torture post-9/11 in the field of the visual. The “iconographic associations” between emotively and morally coded Christian imagery and the photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners pictorially documented in a passion of pornographic humiliation, Mitchell claims, are inevitable – an automatic cultural reflex. The question is, rather, how to make sense of them. If one result of modernity’s processes of secularization is that the narrative logic of tragedy becomes impossible without pre-secular determinism (fate no longer produces victims), these images nevertheless resonate powerfully in the Western iconic memory of the suffering Christ. They are, however, also melodramatic. With a visual quality that approximates the haptic, they emerge in direct relation to the public and politically situated melodramatic articulations of victimhood and villainy described in Elisabeth Anker’s work, punctuating the post-9/11 moment with an aesthetic shock. The facile application of the pathos formulae, where victims are depicted pleasuring in their own pain, serves iconic memory on the one hand, while aligning with the melodramatic spectacle of suffering and with modes of victim-viewer identification on the other. What troubles these images is not the inter-iconicity of pornographic pleasure, Christian martyrdom and melodramatic victimhood per se; an intuitive continuity between these is, I should think, evident. Rather, for melodrama as a mode of sense-making or cultural myth, the emergence of the Abu Ghraib Archive deeply complicates the victim-villain-hero categories that were previously mobilized in State politics and public media. They present the odd situation in which a real material occult (the fact of torturing prisoners) is made aesthetically accessible to the masses with the potential effect of returning what had previously structured the condition of moral legibility to a morally occulted position. What happens, then, to the relay of pathos and retributive action? And how is one to align one’s sympathies? Does the emergence of the Abu Ghraib Archive present a fissure in the mythology of melodrama that lent narrative form to the post-9/11 moment? And if it does, what does this fissure make visible – the limits of melodrama, its inappropriateness
to the material and social reality of this particular moment? Or does the fissure point to the inextricable, entrenched tensions and contingencies of history that, in its most fundamental form, melodrama seeks to cover? There is no little irony in the conflation of victim and villain positions, or in the transformation of the Muslim jihadist into a martyred Christ. In this anti-Manichaean grey area, what potentially remains is melodrama's structural sentimentalism that evacuates the authenticity of real human suffering and the potential horror, empathy and acts of solidarity that the spectacle of suffering might otherwise induce. As a point of entry to Mitchell's essay, which the editors are honored to reprint here, I wonder to what extent this structural sentimentalism is retroactively applicable to the iconicity of Christianity in its time of hegemony.