Introduction

This chapter explores the psycho-cultural relationships between sport, politics and popular culture by focusing on the 2012 London Olympic Games and in particular, the role played by the London Mayor, Boris Johnson, whose appearances during the Games enabled him to communicate to vast audiences on a variety of media platforms. The mediatisation of politics and sport creates new opportunities for politicians such as Johnson to exploit postmodern methods of political communication, which elsewhere, I have defined as flirtatious in form and content (Yates, 2010). Johnson can be viewed as the celebrity politician par excellence, whose charismatic and eccentric public persona appears to provide an antidote to the technocratic managerial style of party politicians today. From waving to crowds whilst suspended on a zip wire, to ‘dad dancing’ to the Spice Girls at the closing ceremony, the televised spectacle of the 2012 Olympic Games provided the perfect mise en scène for Johnson to perform his schtick to full effect, tapping into the public mood that shifted from one of scepticism about the Games to one of an apparent shared national enthusiasm (Cottrell Boyce, 2012).

The boundaries between politics as sport and the sport of politics are often blurred with Johnson. As I discuss, the close relationship between sport and politics is well documented, and as the Mayor of London, Johnson was able to exploit the spectacle of the Olympic Games for
his own promotional purposes. Johnson’s political identity is slippery; as joker and as a skilled political orator, Johnson often makes political sport of challenging the establishment, whilst as a white, middle class, Oxbridge educated, card-carrying member of the Conservative Party, he also symbolises all that the establishment is held up to be. With one eye on the banking service sector and one on the electorate, he negotiates the potential contradictions of his political position by adopting a persona articulated through tropes of both Englishness and amateurism. In this way, he harks back to an earlier era of deference whilst simultaneously appearing to refuse the patriarchal structures of authority that shaped it.

The relationship between changing forms of political representation and the potential of the contemporary mediatised public field for active political participation has been discussed by scholars in the field of political media and cultural studies (Craig, 2004; Thompson, 2000; Washbourne, 2010). Yet less has been said about the symbolic, playful spaces that are opened up for unconscious, affective modes of identification and fantasy, which may emerge as a consequence of the increasingly fluid boundaries between popular and political culture. Drawing on theories and ideas taken from the psychoanalytic tradition of object relations, the notion of ‘play’ as a mode of object relating can be applied to the field of sports and its relationship to political culture. The engagement with the 2012 Olympic coverage provides a useful case study to explore the fantasies that also emerge as a component of the kind of mediatised, celebrity and personality driven political culture which characterises contemporary Western democracies, such as in the UK.

With these ideas in mind, this chapter applies a psycho-cultural approach, which combines social and cultural analyses with the psychoanalytic ideas of Donald Winnicott (1953, 1967) and Christopher Bollas (1987, 1992), to examine the transformational qualities of the 2012 Olympic Games and its mediatised coverage as objects of fantasy that traverse the inner and outer spheres of psychosocial and cultural experience. Firstly, however, I contextualise the discussion by turning to the relationship between sport, politics and the Olympic Games, focusing also on its links to celebrity politics and promotional culture.

The Promotional Context of Sport, Politics and the Olympic Games

The links between sport and politics are well established and have a long history that can be traced back to ancient Greece, where the Olympic