

For a Fistful of Fame: Carnera at the Intersection of Sports and Entertainment*

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This paper explores the figure of Primo Carnera (1906-1967) – the first Italian to win a world boxing title in 1933 – as a paradigmatic case for understanding the transformation of celebrity capital during the post-career phase, within a media environment vastly different from today's, initially dominated by cinema and later by television. Carnera was notable not only for his athletic achievements; his public image was skillfully renegotiated and reshaped by traditional media – newspapers, cinema, and later television – which solidified his status as a prominent celebrity even after his retirement from the ring. This study focuses particularly on Carnera's ability to reinvent himself during his post-career phase, managing to retain a prominent position despite ageing and physical changes, thanks to the resources offered by the media landscape of his time. His transition from sport to the broader field of entertainment stands as a compelling instance of how celebrity capital can be strategically redeployed beyond the athlete's initial domain of renown. Through the analysis of various media narratives – from journalistic reports to films, comics, and television portrayals – this paper discusses how Carnera made the most of his fame, leveraging the main media platforms of the era. Adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, this study draws on media analysis and celebrity studies to investigate how strategies of self-narration – mediated through traditional formats such as cinema and television – enabled Carnera to sustain his public profile across shifting media landscapes and biographical ageing.

Keywords: Primo Carnera, Celebrity capital, Media transformation, Post-career, Boxe

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The life of Primo Carnera offers a compelling case study to explore the complex entanglements between sport, celebrity, media, and politics (Andrews & Jackson, 2002). Existing scholarship on the Friulian boxer has largely focused on two areas: his athletic achievements and the ways in which Fascist propaganda capitalised on his public image, constructing the popular myth of the “giant with feet of clay” (Buscemi, 2020; Mancuso, 2017; Marchesini, 2006; Mottadelli, 2015). This study shifts the focus to Carnera’s post-career phase, examining how his public persona was reshaped through his engagements beyond the boxing ring. Analysing his personal trajectory provides a lens through which to investigate the intersections of mediatization, the spectacularization of sport, and the cultural representation of the athletic body.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach – drawing on biographical methods (Zanfrini, 1999; Spano, 2005), mediology, sports sociology, and celebrity studies – this article traces the evolution and reconfiguration of Carnera’s celebrity capital. It reveals how this iconic Italian sports figure turned his body into both a symbol of social redemption and an enduring presence in national collective memory. As Olivier Driessens (2013) argues, celebrity capital may be understood as a form of symbolic capital (in a Bourdieusian sense) derived from public visibility and media exposure, and convertible into other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) across different fields. Far from being a static asset, this capital is subject to fluctuation, shaped by media engagement, audience responsiveness, and the celebrity’s ability to navigate evolving cultural terrains. Carnera provides a valuable historical case study to explore these dynamics, demonstrating how celebrity capital can be strategically reactivated across shifting media platforms – from the circus arena to comics, cinema, and television – even in the absence of continued athletic success. Building on Barrie Gunter’s (2014) work, Carnera’s trajectory can be seen as an instance of fame durability grounded not simply in charisma or singular achievement, but in the adaptability of his persona to a wide range of media grammars. His case also resonates with the “celebrity capital life cycle” proposed by Carrillat and Ilicic (2019), who argue that celebrity status requires ongoing strategic engagement and narrative repositioning. Carnera’s evolution – from heavyweight champion to wrestler, film actor, and television personality – showcases a rare capacity to stretch symbolic capital across time and genre, a feat seldom achieved by early twentieth-century athletes. Lastly, Carnera’s career may be read through the lens of Franck’s (2018) economy of attention, in which visibility operates as a form of currency within the symbolic marketplace of fame. His sustained public presence – despite ageing, sporting defeat, and ideological appropriation – highlights how bodies marked by narrative density and physical extraordinariness can function as potent attention magnets, enabling symbolic capital to circulate well beyond the domain of athletic performance.

This study is guided by two main questions: how did Primo Carnera navigate the cultural and media transitions of his time, adapting his public persona across multiple formats and narrative genres? What does Carnera’s post-career trajectory reveal about the conditions of persistence of celebrity capital in early twentieth-century media culture – particularly regarding the symbolic flexibility of the athletic body, the adaptability of the “gentle giant”

archetype, and the role of cross-media storytelling in sustaining fame beyond athletic success?

This article aims not only to reconstruct the trajectory of Primo Carnera's post-career fame, but also to situate it within a broader theoretical reflection on how celebrity capital is accumulated, sustained, and reconfigured. Focusing on a figure whose fame spanned circus, sport, comics, cinema and television – and who managed to retain cultural visibility despite physical decline and the end of athletic success – the article contributes to ongoing debates on the durability and translatability of celebrity. Carnera's public image challenges linear or medium-specific conceptions of fame, illustrating how certain embodied archetypes – such as the “gentle giant” – operate as floating signifiers, capable of adapting to diverse narrative and ideological frameworks. Through this lens, the article seeks to expand the field of celebrity studies by demonstrating how symbolic capital grounded in bodily extraordinariness may be preserved through cross-media storytelling, and how fame can be renegotiated over time through a dynamic interplay between personal agency, industrial logics, and cultural archetypes. Rather than offering an exceptionalist portrait, Carnera functions here as a heuristic device for rethinking the conditions under which fame persists or fades, bringing to the surface the invisible scaffolding that supports long-term celebrity within pre-digital media ecologies.

Panem et Circenses et Boxe

Primo Carnera, born in Sequals in 1906, grew up in conditions of extreme poverty, which led him to emigrate to France at a young age. It was there that his life first intersected with the worlds of sports and entertainment, through the circus environment, where he was hired as a sideshow attraction:

He was a regular spectator and the owner of one of the sideshow tents noticed the young man towering a good 30-40 cm above the rest of the crowd. Alphonse Ledudal, as he was called, likely sensed – thanks to the shrewd instincts of a somewhat roguish man of the streets – the potential profits that someone of Primo Carnera's size (and presumed strength) could bring to his “business”. He approached Carnera, offering him a life full of excitement and adventure: endless entertainment, money for fine clothes, and enough food to stave off hunger. And so, the young Friulian, seeking his fortune in the world, found himself, at the age of nineteen, working for a small circus. There, he became “Juan the Terrible”, “the Terror of Guadalajara”, “le champion qui jamais a été battu”, the star attraction of the show.¹ (de Concini, 2006, p.65).

This environment drew from a 19th-century tradition that was beginning to evolve into something new, thanks to the emergence of mass media. However, the circus and similar popular spectacles still retained a distinctly 19th-century aesthetic of “wonder”, characterized by an emphasis on the exceptional and the extraordinary, where unusual bodies took center stage. This spectacle culture, in which Carnera's career was rooted, can be more precisely understood through the conceptual framework of the freak show, as

developed by Robert Bogdan (1988). In his analysis, Bogdan distinguishes between the “exotic mode” – which frames physical difference as culturally distant – and the “aggrandized mode”, which emphasizes physical extraordinariness (such as size or strength) as a mark of heroic exceptionality. Carnera’s portrayal, particularly in comics and films, aligns closely with the aggrandized mode: he was not a grotesque anomaly, but an exalted figure whose gigantism was admired, idealized, and narratively domesticated.

Moreover, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1996, 1997) argues, the cultural function of bodily “deviance” is not only to provoke wonder, but also to serve as a site for the negotiation of normativity. Her work on “the stare” and “the spectacle” of the extraordinary body reveals how physical difference is transformed into narrative capital. Carnera’s case reflects this dynamic: his gigantism becomes a “legible” sign of strength, masculinity, and moral innocence – a template that enabled his repositioning from a circus attraction to a cinematic and televisual archetype. Through his body, audiences could experience both admiration and reassurance, as his strength was consistently framed within the archetype of the gentle giant, a benign other who, despite his size, elicits empathy and affection, rather than fear. In this context, Carnera’s gigantic physique and imposing presence proved to be a perfect match for performances centered on wrestling. It is worth noting that professional wrestling, which would later become a key component of Carnera’s post-boxing career, originated in France around 1830. During that period, wrestlers excluded from the elite wrestling circuits formed itinerant troupes, showcasing their skills at fairs and circuses. These wrestlers shared the stage with other performers, such as exotic animal exhibitors, tightrope walkers, and bearded women, reflecting a spectacle culture still deeply rooted in the tradition of the freak show.

During one of the circus stops, Primo was noticed by former French boxer Paul Journée, who introduced him to the world of professional boxing. In 1929, he arrived in the United States at the height of the Great Depression, Prohibition, and the dominance of the Italian-American mafia. His career began with a rapid and seemingly unstoppable rise, aided by fixed matches orchestrated by the mafia and his manager, culminating in his victory of the world heavyweight title on June 29, 1933, when he defeated Jack Sharkey.

However, his journey was not depleted of tragedy. The death of boxer Ernie Schaaf, partially attributed to a bout with Carnera in the February of the same year, left a profound mark on Carnera’s life. This tragic event helped to shape the image of Carnera as the “gentle giant”, leaving an indelible imprint on his career.

These athletic achievements laid the foundation of the celebrity capital Carnera amassed, which, in the context of the era’s migration dynamics, transformed him into a true popular hero. For many Italians, both in the United States and in Italy, Carnera became a symbol of the struggles and sacrifices endured by migrant communities. This deep emotional connection, where “the identification of fans with a sports hero creates an in-group, a ‘We’, that professes shared worldviews and experiences mutual trust and loyalty” (Tirino & Castellano, 2020, p.52), foreshadowed the Fascist propaganda that would soon capitalize on his image.

Mottadelli (2015) highlights how, following his title victory, the Fascist regime launched a campaign to exploit Primo Carnera's image, transforming him into an icon of Italian racial strength and aligning him with Fascism. His figure was idealized, with physical imperfections removed, and he was visually integrated into the regime's rhetoric, often depicted in a black shirt or military uniform, accompanied by declarations of patriotism and support for Mussolini. However, popular interest in Carnera had already begun to emerge in the early 1930s, prior to the regime's formal propaganda efforts. This fascination, visible in the press, novels, and popular songs, celebrated not only his athletic victories, but also his sexual magnetism and links with celebrities and the American underworld. While not explicitly Fascist, these representations often conveyed virilist and heroic ideals that aligned closely with Fascist values, suggesting a cultural environment already receptive to his subsequent ideological appropriation.

Despite his defeats against Max Baer in 1934 and Joe Louis in 1935, Carnera retained significant relevance, transcending wins and losses, and building a celebrity capital that made him a prominent figure in the popular culture of the time. He soon began leveraging this capital in his post-career endeavors, becoming the central figure in a variety of media productions. His body became the focal point of narratives that combined a sense of wonder and amazement – characteristics of the era's spectacles celebrating the extraordinary and the superhuman – with an ideal of raw strength and benevolence.

Carnera's Strips

Even before winning the world title, Carnera's imposing presence captured the public imagination, influencing even Disney, which drew inspiration from the Friulian boxer for one of its early sports-themed comic stories. In *Boxing Champion* (1931) by Floyd Gottfredson, Mickey Mouse faces off against "Creamo Catnera", a ruthless feline boxer whose name and strength clearly allude to Carnera (Di Paola, 2023). The relationship between Carnera and comics is surprisingly rich, complex, and multifaceted, reflecting the boxer's ability to captivate the masses and inspire narratives that, starting with his physicality, stretch into the realm of diverse adventures.

Carnera becomes, in fact, a figure capable of embodying the ideals and stereotypes of his era. Comics, an extremely popular and widespread medium in the 1930s, were particularly well-suited to transforming his image into myth. Due to its versatility, the medium provides a variety of representations of Carnera, whose figure continually oscillates between myth and reality.

Remarkably, Carnera himself developed a curious passion for this medium. In the early 1930s, the King Features Syndicate began publishing a series of comic strips titled *Primo's Dreams*, credited to the Italian boxer himself. These strips playfully explore the imposing physicality of the boxer, placing him on the fine line between dream and reality.

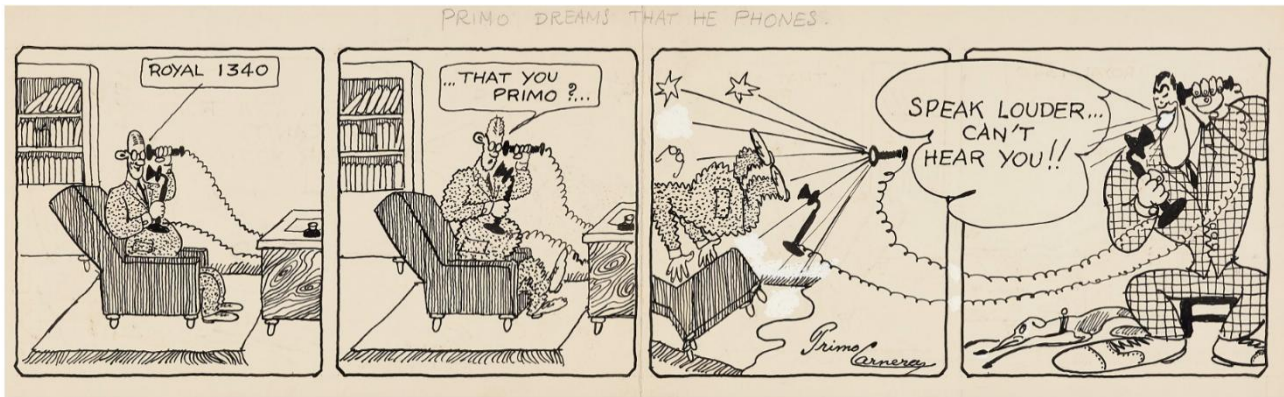


Figure 1: *Primo's Dreams*. Ulrich Merkl Collection.

In fact, it is highly likely that the strips were actually created by the Franco-Belgian cartoonist Louis Gérard Berings:

Primo had met Louis Gérard Berings in Paris [...]. He was captivated by the beauty of the cartoons Berings published daily in the newspaper «Le Matin». The Friulian boxer harbored a secret passion: the desire to draw himself. He therefore asked Berings [...] to give him lessons. This led to a solid friendship, so much so that when Carnera set sail for the United Kingdom, already wrapped in glory and wealth, he convinced Berings to accompany him. [...] Thus, in 1930, Carnera produced a substantial series of comic strips in a humorous style, often placing himself at the center of the situations as the target of gentle teasing, which further increased his popularity and likability. Three years later, the entire series was revisited and published under the title *Primo Carnera's Nightmares* [...] by the «New York Journal». ² (Zanotto, 2006, p.189).

Italy, unsurprisingly, could not remain indifferent to the epic story of Carnera (Di Paola, 2023). Notably, much like the cinema of the time began transforming athletes into movie stars, comics capitalized on the popularity of such figures. The first character inspired by Carnera – both in his body and in his predisposition for fistfights – was *Dick Fulmine* (1938), created by comics artist Carlo Cossio and sports journalist Vincenzo Baggioli. Although not a sports-themed comic, *Dick Fulmine* featured a plainclothes police officer in Chicago, whose Italian-American identity and penchant for brawling reinforced the already widespread and international myth of Carnera. A second character clearly indebted to both *Dick Fulmine* and Primo Carnera was *Furio Almirante* – initially illustrated by Carlo Cossio and later scripted by Gian Luigi Bonelli – whose storyline likewise revolved around muscular strength, migrant heroism, and rough justice. Furio, an Italian boxer who emigrates to the United States, quickly learns to dispense justice on his own, defending himself and the vulnerable from the powerful and exploitative. Both *Dick Fulmine* and *Furio Almirante* conformed closely to the governmental directives of the period. Not only did they perform Roman salutes and fight against dangerous outlaws (mostly depicted with racial or ethnic stereotypes), but they also embodied the prototype of masculinity promoted by Fascism.

Comics thus absorbed the propagandistic narrative that Fascism had constructed around Carnera, whose physical characteristics were ideally suited to the glorification of Italian vigor and athletic prowess, as shown by numerous newspaper articles dedicated to his figure (Mancuso, 2017). A few years after the end of the war, in 1947, *Carnera*, another comic

series inspired by the Friulian giant, appeared on newsstands. Created by publisher Tristano Torelli with artwork by Mario Uggeri, this series, published in the typical strip format of the era, depicted the imaginary life of the boxer, combining his bouts in the ring with battles against various types of criminals. The tone is completely different in the short story *Carnera il gigante buono* by Sergio Toppi, published in 1972 in *Corriere dei Ragazzi*, and in Toffolo's graphic novel *Carnera: la montagna che cammina* (2001), where the focus shifts from fantastical adventures to a strong emphasis on biographical details. Interestingly (though unproven), legend has it that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were inspired by Carnera when creating the character of Superman. Indeed, the cover of Superman's debut issue bears a striking resemblance to an illustration that circulated globally in *La Domenica del Corriere* (1933), showing Carnera in Hollywood lifting a car with his bare hands to save a man.



Figure 2 Superman n.1 (1938) - Domenica del Corriere (1933)

A Cellulose Giant

If comics serve as an excellent indicator of Carnera's popularity, cinema truly allowed to capitalize on this popularity in his post-career phase, marked by relentless activity. The film industry, unsurprisingly, leveraged the familiarity and public image Carnera had built during his boxing career. In 1933, the same year he won the world heavyweight title, Carnera appeared in two Hollywood films: *Mr. Broadway* by Walker (in which he makes a brief appearance as himself) and *The Prizefighter and the Lady* by W.S. Van Dyke, where he portrays himself in a boxing match against Max Baer. Notably, Baer would later defeat Carnera in real life, claiming the title in 1934. While promoting the latter film, Metro-Goldwyn-

Mayer (MGM) heavily mentioned the fact that the two leading actors were real-life athletes destined to face each other in the ring. Following Carnera's title victory, MGM capitalized further on his fame by incorporating archival footage into *Bombshell* (1933), a film directed by Victor Fleming, though Carnera himself had no active role in the production.

When Carnera returned to Italy in 1937, following a series of painful defeats and plagued by financial and health problems, his popularity was still remarkably high. He embarked on an eight-month tour with Renato Rascel and between 1939 and 1949 appeared as a character actor in ten films produced at Cinecittà. These included *Traversata nera* (1939) by Domenico M. Gambino, *Vento di Milioni* (1940) by Dino Falconi, *La nascita di Salomé* (1940) by Jean Choux, *La figlia del Corsaro Verde* (1941) by Enrico Guazzoni, and *La corona di ferro* (1941) by Alessandro Blasetti. He resumed his role as himself in *Harlem* (1942) by Carmine Gallone, and concluded this phase of his Italian film career with *Due cuori tra le belve* (1943) by Giorgio C. Simonelli.

All these works, in one way or another, "play on the dimensional contrast between his gigantic figure" (Gaberscek, 2006, p.166) and the smaller stature of those around him. When Carnera returned to the United States in 1946, his boxing career was nearing its end, but within a few years, he would achieve renewed fame through professional wrestling (a topic explored later). This newfound success led to his participation, once again portraying himself, in *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack.

In Italy, in 1952, he again played himself in *Il Tallone di Achille* by Amendola and Maccari, where the comedic potential of the disproportionate size contrast between Carnera and the diminutive Tino Scotti was exploited. In the United States, he appeared in several productions alongside notable actors such as Bob Hope, Vincent Price, and Robert Wagner in *Casanova's Big Night* (1954) by Norman Z. McLeod, and *Prince Valiant* (1954) by Henry Hathaway, where he played minor roles. His final film, *Hercules and the Queen of Lydia* (1958), directed by Pietro Francisci, once again capitalized on his physicality, casting him as the overbearing giant Antaeus.

Primo Carnera's cinematic career highlights his ability to leverage his image through the consistent use of his now-iconic extraordinary physique. Notably, both in the United States and Italy, he frequently portrayed himself – often with a touch of irony – in one-dimensional roles that emphasized his nature as a "gentle giant", often clumsy or self-deprecating. Drawing first on the success of his boxing career and later on his post-boxing achievements in professional wrestling, Carnera effectively responded to the cultural demands of two distinct national contexts. This proves how cinema could offer new avenues for transforming an athlete into a true icon.

Catch Me If You Can

Unlike the heavily choreographed and media-saturated spectacle we know today, post-war professional wrestling in the late 1940s was still closely tied to its vaudeville and circus roots, blending athletic competition with theatrical performance.

In 1946, at the age of forty, Carnera hung up his boxing gloves. Unexpectedly, life presented him with the opportunity to revisit his past as a circus wrestler in a completely new form. Professional wrestling offered the Friulian champion a second chance, and he quickly became a prominent figure in this precursor to modern wrestling, ultimately earning a place in the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) Hall of Fame in 2019. However, this new phase was not merely a reprise of his past. While professional wrestling retained numerous elements of theatricality (including its circus-like origins), it was evolving into a global media phenomenon connoted by a strong narrative structure surrounding its protagonists. As Roland Barthes observes in *Mythologies* (2012, pp. 3-5):

The virtue of wrestling is to be a spectacle of excess. Here we find an emphasis which must have been that of the ancient theaters. [...] Some people consider that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle [...]. The public couldn't care less that the fight is or isn't fixed, and rightly so; the public confines itself to spectacle's primary virtue, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters to this public is not what it believes but what it sees. [...] Hence the wrestler's function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him. [...] Wrestling, on the contrary, proposes excessive gestures, exploited to the paroxysm of their signification. [...] Each sign in wrestling is thus endowed with an utter clarity since everything must always be understood on the spot.

In this context, Carnera's body becomes the interpretive and narrative key through which the audience engages with his performances. His powerful physique and unique personal history make him an ideal embodiment of the "gentle giant", a charismatic and immediately recognizable figure for the public. Shaped by his boxing career and by a life of extraordinary experiences, his physicality thus serves as a "performative mask", lending his gestures and movements a symbolic depth that secured his place in the pantheon of this sport-spectacle.

Carnera's ability to adapt to the world of professional wrestling and to leverage his boxing past to create a new persona demonstrates not only his versatility, but also how his post-career phase was marked by a continuous redefinition of his public identity.

By the 1950s, professional wrestling, particularly in the United States, had begun to extensively exploit mass media, and television became the primary vehicle to expand and sustain its audience. The DuMont Network was the first national broadcaster to air wrestling events:

Fred Kohler, kingpin of the Chicago wrestling world, had been broadcasting his cards locally on two stations (WBKB and WGN) before national TV took hold. [...] But it wasn't until DuMont came calling that he – and pro wrestling – took hold of the mainstream. Wrestling was a natural fit for DuMont; Kohler knew what he was doing, and the shows were cheap to produce – not to mention the fact that his central location and position of power within the NWA meant that he could import the top stars of the "squared circle" to the

small screen. By the early '50s, Thursday and Saturday night pro wrestling were two of the top shows on DuMont and a certified national phenomenon (Shoemaker, 2013, e-book.)

Carnera skilfully seized this opportunity to maintain and renew his relevance, even in the face of ageing and the passage of time. In 1956, at the age of fifty, he won the *WWA Los Angeles International Television* title, intertwining his wrestling career with a narrative that emphasized both his strength and his generosity.³ Television played a crucial role in this process of redefinition. From a declining champion, Carnera repositioned himself as a veteran of strength, someone resilient to the effects of ageing and capable of delivering spectacular matches to audiences who, thanks to TV, could witness his performances from their homes. This mediatization established a continuous bond between the athlete and his audience, renewing his myth through the allure of enduring strength, still visible despite advanced age. Carnera's body, already iconic during his boxing career, now acquired new layers of spectacle. While in the past it symbolized the power of the "Italian race", through wrestling it became an emblem of resilience and vitality, a representation of athletic longevity. Wrestling, with its emphasis on theatricality rather than pure competition, provided Carnera with the opportunity to capitalize on his physicality in new narrative forms.

Carnera's career in professional wrestling thus signals a profound shift at the intersection of sports and entertainment, with mediatization taking on an increasingly central role in the postwar era. Television amplified the spectacle of professional wrestling and redefined the role of athletes, transforming them not only into competitors, but also into entertainers and celebrities crafted for the visual and narrative pleasure of the audience. Carnera's transition to wrestling and his cinematic career embodied this transformation, where the success of an athlete was no longer measured solely by sporting achievements, but also by the ability to adapt and respond to the new dynamics of spectacularization driven by the media.

Conclusions

Despite being often reduced to the myth of the naïve colossus, Primo Carnera exemplifies a remarkable case of adaptive celebrity – a figure whose fame endured not solely because of his athletic triumphs, but thanks to his ability to remain narratively and visually available across shifting media platforms and cultural contexts. His celebrity trajectory offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which fame can persist over time, even in the absence of continued professional victories. Carnera's enduring fame can be attributed to the intersection of three key factors. First, his physical extraordinariness – framed not as deviance, but as heroism – resonated with the "aggrandized mode" of spectacle described by Bogdan (1988), where gigantism becomes a source of wonder and admiration rather than fear or marginalisation. His body was not merely a site of performance, but a symbolic asset, continuously reinterpreted through evolving media grammars. As Garland-Thomson (1996, 1997) has argued, extraordinary bodies function as culturally potent texts – and Carnera's

was particularly legible: monumental, yet gentle; physically imposing, yet emotionally resonant.

Second, his trajectory reveals the media-industrial ecology of early twentieth-century fame. From the circus to comic strips, from cinema to television, Carnera moved seamlessly through a hybrid media landscape that rewarded figures capable of crossing genres and platforms. This cross-media adaptability transformed him into a serialised media object – a persona that could be endlessly recontextualised, domesticated, and reframed. The archetype of the “gentle giant” in particular served as a floating signifier, affording him a narrative elasticity unmatched by many of his contemporaries.

Third, Carnera played an active role in sustaining his celebrity capital, as theorised by Driessens (2013) and Gunter (2014). His willingness to parody himself, to take on comic or self-deprecating roles, and to appear emotionally vulnerable – most notably in his television performance on *Il Musichiere* in 1958 – illustrates that the persistence of fame is never purely structural or accidental. On the contrary, it is co-produced through the figure’s strategic performance of availability and adaptability. On this occasion, Carnera famously sang:

“Lo so che sono un Ercole ma vi confesso che le viole mambole e i marrons glacés e come mi commuovono i drammi al cinema, i bimbi quando piangono e chiamano papà! E questo avviene, ahimè, sapete voi perché? Ho il cuore tenero, tenero, tenero, l’animo nobile, nobile, nobile, sono sensibile, tanto sensibile che se mi toccano mi metto a piangere, faccio uno strillo e chiamo papà!”⁴

This self-parodic performance – far removed from the hypermasculine image cultivated during his boxing years – consolidated his status as the “gentle giant” in the national imagination, endearing him to a mass television audience. The popularity of *Il Musichiere*, one of Italy’s most watched programmes at the time, offered Carnera a platform to reach publics far beyond the traditional confines of sporting fandom, enabling a rearticulation of his persona as both heroic and affectively accessible. Carnera’s narrative adaptability places him in a lineage that anticipates global figures such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, who likewise transitioned from sport to spectacle, from hypermasculine action to comedic self-irony. Both constructed celebrity personas grounded in physical excess, but capable of semantic fluidity – capable of being re-signified without losing recognisability. Carnera, long before the age of digital branding or social media, reveals how fame can function as a modular narrative device, not bound to a single cultural field, but rooted in a body capable of absorbing and redistributing symbolic meaning.

Ultimately, Carnera emerges as more than a historical figure: he becomes a heuristic model for understanding how celebrity capital can be preserved and reactivated across media ecologies. His life – at once mythical and dramatic – offers an epic arc that continues to resonate today: from humble beginnings and the struggle for survival, to the tragic death of an opponent in the ring and the triumph of a world title; from manipulation by managers and the Fascist regime to his reinvention through wrestling, television, and cinema; from national glory to illness and eventual decline. This narrative, rich in conflict, pathos and

contradiction, allows Carnera to exist simultaneously within historical and mythical time. In this light, Carnera's story transcends the often-ephemeral terrain of sports celebrity and enters the symbolic realm of athletic heroism (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). It is a story that endures because it mobilises archetypes that are at once spectacular and intimate – enabling Primo Carnera to remain, even today, a cultural figure both extraordinary and profoundly human.

Biographical Note

Lorenzo Di Paola is an FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). His research sits at the intersection of media studies, comics studies, the sociology of literature, visual and digital cultures. He is the author of the monograph *L'inafferrabile medium. Una cartografia delle teorie del fumetto dagli anni Venti a oggi* (2019), and has published widely in Italian and international peer-reviewed journals, including *Comicalités*, *Cinergie*, *Studies in Comics*, *Im@go*, *Elephant & Castle*, *Sociétés*, *H-ermes*, *Mediascapes* and *Between*, as well as in various edited collections. He is a founding member of SNIF – *Studying 'n' Investigating Fumetti*, an international research network dedicated to the interdisciplinary study and promotion of comics. He collaborates with several research groups, including COMICS (Ghent University), ACME (Université de Liège), the Centro Studi Media Culture Società, and DICSLab – Digital Culture & Sport Lab at the University of Salerno.

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Notes

¹ È uno spettatore assiduo il proprietario di uno dei baracconi si accorge di quel giovanottone che supera il rimanente pubblico di buoni 30-40 cm. Alphonse Ledudal, questo è il suo nome, intuisce forse, con il fiuto sicuro dell'uomo di strada un po' malandrino, i possibili futuri guadagni che un uomo della stazza (e della probabile forza) di Primo Carnera potrebbe apportare alla sua "impresa". Gli si avvicina, gli prospetta una vita varia ed avventurosa: divertimenti a non finire, soldi per bei vestiti, pasti a sufficienza per calmare la fame. E così il ragazzone friulano, andato nel mondo in cerca di fortuna, finisce intanto, diciannovenne, in un piccolo circo: diventa "Juan il terribile", "il terrore di Guadalajara", "*le champion qui jamais a été battu*", il numero *clou* dello spettacolo.

² Primo aveva conosciuto Louis Gérard Berings a Parigi [...]. Era rimasto conquistato dalla bellezza delle vignette che il *cartoonist* pubblicava ogni giorno nel giornale «Le Matin». Aveva una segreta passione il friulano: potere egli stesso disegnare. Chiese quindi a Berings [...] di impartirgli delle lezioni. Tutto questo sfociò in un'amicizia tanto solida che allorché Carnera stava salpando per il Regno Unito, già avvolto di gloria e ricco, convinse Berings a seguirlo. Fu così che nel 1930 Carnera disegnò una folta serie di *strips*, in una variante umoristica che, ponendosi sempre egli al centro delle situazioni come bersaglio di garbati sfottò gli assicurò ulteriore popolarità e simpatia. Tre anni più tardi l'intera serie venne ripresa e pubblicata col sopra titolo *Primo Carnera's Nightmares* [...] dal «New York Journal».

³ "Article 17 of the contract signed with his manager required Harris to ensure that event organizers allocated half of all proceeds to support relief efforts for Italy. If this was not possible, Carnera himself would personally donate 5 percent of his earnings" (Toschi, 2006, p.151).

⁴ "I know I am a Hercules, but I confess that violets, marrons glacés, and cinematic dramas deeply move me, as do children crying and calling for their mother! And this happens, alas, because—do you know why? —I have a tender, tender heart, a noble, noble soul, and I am so sensitive that if someone touches me, I start crying, scream out, and call for my father!". This is a song by Renato Rascel (1955), slightly altered and adapted to the context.