



Mainstreaming the Margins and Marginalizing the Mainstream in Contemporary Egyptian Culture

International Conference, Cairo, October 26-28th, 2025

CEDEJ / AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

hosted by IFAO

Organised by Ramy Aly (AUC), Sophie Frankford (King's College London) and
Frédéric Lagrange (CEDEJ)

Bringing together practitioners and scholars working on entertainment, arts, literature and language from a range of disciplinary perspectives, this conference is devoted to the complex dialectical relationship between mainstream and margin in contemporary Egyptian culture.

Egypt's cultural industries have undergone profound transformations in recent years. Artists and content creators face increasing scrutiny (and sometimes outright repression) from the state, the artistic syndicates, and self-appointed guardians of public morality. Simultaneously, decentralised media forms have created new opportunities for cultural production beyond the state-controlled commercial mainstream. Egypt's place in the broader global mediascape is also shifting, as the country's historic role as the epicentre of cultural production in the Arab world is being reconfigured by the Gulf's growing financial influence. This, combined with the rise of transnational platforms like TikTok and Spotify, as well as increasing engagement with diaspora communities, is influencing patterns of production and consumption, and reshaping established institutions and media norms.

How are these transformations serving to unsettle boundaries between mainstream and margin, 'high' and 'low' culture, legitimate and illegitimate expression? Are these boundaries more fluid now than in previous eras, or does historicising our "exceptional" contemporary moment reveal more continuities than ruptures? Who are creators writing, playing, composing or performing for, and where do their productions sit in our broader understanding of Egyptian public culture? Are established theories of culture and power like the mainstream and margins; commercialisation and incorporation; subcultures, countercultures and post subcultures useful in this context, or might emic approaches and theories prove equally, or more, productive?

We hope this conference will provide an opportunity to think about repositioning Egypt, and the region more broadly, as a place of knowledge production; a place from which theory emerges, not just be applied or localised. We invite scholars and practitioners of contemporary Egyptian cultural production to submit paper proposals around the following key themes:

- The affordances (or not) of new media / big and small media
- Egypt's shifting place in the broader ecosystem of cultural production in the Arab world and beyond
- Historical perspectives on contemporary cultural transformations



- Institutional influences on cultural production (the state, the artistic syndicates, industry gatekeepers or funders)
- Audience experiences / reception studies
- Streaming services / platforms and AI / algorithmic bias
- Intersections of class, race and/or gender in cultural production
- Methodological and theoretical approaches to studying mainstreams/margins
- Insights from practitioners and cultural producers

Organizers:

Ramy Aly, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, American University in Cairo

Sophie Frankford, Postdoctoral Research Associate, King's College London

Frédéric Lagrange, Director of CEDEJ (Cairo), Professor of Arabic Studies at Sorbonne Université, Paris

Conference Languages: the languages of the conference are English and Arabic.

Venues: the conference will take place at IFAO (Munira) and AUC (Tahrir).

Submission of Proposals: Paper proposals must be submitted in one of the conference languages by 15th April 2025.

Please include in your submission: • A title for the paper • An abstract of up to 300 words • A short biography of the author (100 words).

Submissions will be selected based on the relevance of the topic, originality of the approach, and scientific quality. Authors will be notified about acceptance in June 2025.

Publication of Proceedings: Following the conference, a collective volume will be published open access in ESMA (<https://journals.openedition.org/esma/>). Authors of selected papers will have the opportunity to submit an article for publication.

Please send proposals, and any questions (including information about the possibility of applying for travel/accommodation funds) to:

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