Epistemic trade-offs in aesthetic judgement

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Abstract. Aesthetic judgment inherently involves a complex tension between subjective emotional immersion and rational analysis. This paper addresses the "epistemic trade-offs" intrinsic to aesthetic practice, in which maximizing one type of epistemic good—such as emotional authenticity or immersive experience—often requires sacrificing another—such as conceptual clarity or structural analysis. Adopting a framework of epistemic rule-consequentialism, the study evaluates the rationality of aesthetic judgments based on their overall cognitive outcomes rather than adherence to rigid a priori rules. The paper proposes a normative mechanism, "aggregate epistemic optimization", facilitates the deliberate weighing and prioritization of competing cognitive goals. Through case studies of film narratives (e.g., *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Parasite*) and abstract painting, the analysis demonstrates how specific contexts require different cognitive priority structures. The study concludes that acknowledging these trade-offs does not lead to relativism; instead, by establishing context-sensitive rules and minimum epistemic thresholds, it is possible to construct a flexible yet normative framework that balances the diversity of aesthetic experience with the rigor of rational evaluation.

Keywords: aesthetic judgment, epistemic trade-offs, epistemic consequentialism, aggregate epistemic optimization, cognitive value

1. Introduction

Experiencing an artwork involves confronting a paradox: deep aesthetic pleasure arises from empathizing with the emotional bond between viewer and work, yet there is also a pereived need for a rational gap—a pause or a distinction—between the subject and the artwork to figure out its structure, its symbolism, and meaning fully. There is a desire to engage deeply with the work deeply while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from it. This tension between "subjective discovery and rational confirmation" is endemic to almost all aesthetic judgments and constitutes a significant obstacle in aesthetic debate [1].

"It's something that's particularly present in modern and contemporary art, which may not always follow traditional types or forms of representation". Objective criticism of some art may dull the emotional effect, yet pure subjective experience may also ignore deeper messages for which there is "no appreciation in the philosophy of art [2]". This represents an epistemic trade-off: various epistemic goods, including emotional insight and conceptual clarity, cannot always be maximized simultaneously, necessitating context-sensitive decisions.

To address this, epistemic consequentialism is considered, through which opponents of ranking works of art may evaluate competing aesthetic judgments. This theory holds that the justification of a belief or judgment depends on its epistemic consequences, such as promoting truth, improving understanding, stimulating moral growth, or deepening self-knowledge. In aesthetics, this approach shifts focus away from the battle between prioritizing emotion over reason, or vice versa. Instead, it prompts an evaluation of the "epistemic costs and benefits" of judgment, enabling identification of the judgment pathway that yields the overall optimal cognitive outcomes.

Grounded in this theory, this paper systematically explores the epistemic tensions in aesthetic judgment and proposes a normative framework based on "overall epistemic optimization". This approach aims to provide an analytical tool for aesthetic practice that effectively balances diversity and rationality. Ultimately, the significance of this research lies in its potential to reconcile the long-standing dichotomy between affect and cognition, offering a more inclusive and dynamic methodological foundation for contemporary art criticism and appreciation.

2. Theoretical background

To understand the cognitive trade-offs in aesthetic judgment, it is necessary first to clarify some core concepts. Epistemic consequentialism is a normative theoretical framework that evaluates the rationality of a belief or belief-forming practice based on its cognitive outcomes, As one proponent notes, "in some sense, rightness is to be understood in terms of goodness [3]". These goods typically include objectives such as truth, understanding, knowledge, and epistemic autonomy. In contrast to theories that ground the legitimacy of beliefs in internal rules or a priori conditions, epistemic consequentialism takes an outcome-oriented approach, in which the value of a belief is determined by the cognitive consequences it produces.

In academic discussions, epistemological consequentialism is mainly divided into two types: act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism. Act-consequentialism evaluates individual beliefs on a case-by-case basis, arguing that a belief is rational if it directly promotes the attainment of truth or enhances epistemic value. While this approach is theoretically straightforward, it often encounters practical challenges, such as the risk of "hindsight bias [4]". This bias occurs when the rationality of a belief is overly influenced by its retrospective cognitive outcomes, thereby undermining the operational consistency and predictive reliability of the framework.

By contrast, rule-consequentialism is more concerned with the practice of rationality in its long-term dimension. It asserts that the rationality of beliefs should depend on adherence to a set of "belief-forming rules" that, on the whole, produce good cognitive outcomes [5]. For example, rules such as "remain skepticism", "respect the evidence" and "avoid logical contradictions" do not produce optimal outcomes in every instance, but they maximize cognitive goodness overall. This model is better suited to constructing stable, generalizable cognitive evaluation systems, so this paper will also use rule-based consequentialism as its main analytical framework.

When applying consequentialist theories to the aesthetic domain, a critical question arises: Are different epistemic goals always aligned? Or do specific practical contexts require sacrificing certain epistemic goods to prioritize others that are more valuable or attainable? This leads to the central question that this paper focuses on: the "epistemic trade-offs". In aesthetic judgment, diverse epistemic values such as emotional understanding, conceptual clarity, ethical awareness, and cultural depth often cannot be simultaneously maximized, which requires choices in the judgment process and assess whether certain criteria justify such

trade-offs. Epistemic consequentialism, especially its rule-based variant, provides a systematic evaluative framework for such conflicts.

3. Affective and cognitive tensions in aesthetic judgement

Aesthetic judgment has long been regarded as a distinct type of judgment between subjective experience and rational analysis, and its normative and epistemic status has been a persistent focus of theoretical controversy. One of the most illuminating early explorations of this issue can be found in Kant's analysis in the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant asserts that "for if the aesthetic judgment carries such a claim with it, then it also claims that its determining ground must lie not merely in the feeling of pleasure and displeasure in itself alone, but at the same time in a rule of the higher faculty of cognition [6]". On the one hand, it is a judgment based on "pleasure", closely related to the sensory experiences of pleasure or displeasure; on the other hand, it claims to be "subjective and universal", meaning that, even without a solid conceptual foundation, individuals expects others to affirm their aesthetic experience.

Kant's distinction establishes the theoretical foundation for subsequent conceptions of aesthetic judgment as neither purely subjective nor purely rational. Building on this, modern aesthetic theory has further developed the concept of "dual structure of aesthetic judgment": the intrinsic intertwining and interaction of the "perceptual dimension" and "cognitive dimension" in aesthetic experience [7]. For instance, Berys Gaut proposed that "when art teaches us morally, this is at least sometimes an aesthetic merit in it [8]". Noël Carroll emphasized the central role of "narrative structure" in film aesthetics, and claimed that "the test of whether a stretch of cinematic sequencing is successful is whether or not it works—whether or not it communicates, whether or not an audience can follow it, whether or not it achieves the effect the image maker intends [9, 10]". In other words, he argues that the audiences emotional response often depends on a rational understanding of the event structure and character motivations; and Eileen John argues that literary works provide "cognitive value in emotional experience" through structural organization, allowing readers to gain insights through emotional engagement [11]. Collectively, these perspectives emphasize that emotion and cognition are not mutually exclusive but form a structurally integrated whole in aesthetic judgment.

However, in the specific practice of aesthetic judgment, it is common to encounter not only the tension between sensibility and rationality, but also direct conflicts between different types of epistemic value. These conflicts do not stem from deficiencies in judgmental capacity, but from the inherent structural complexity of aesthetic experience itself—namely, the intrinsic tension between the conditions required for different epistemic goods. In this section, this paper identifies two common "epistemic trade-off" situations and analyzes how the epistemic goals reflected in them exclude or compete with one another.

The first is between immersion and analysis. For instance, in immersive drama, expressionist painting, or poetry readings, audiences often form a deep connection with the work through immersion or empathy. This experience emphasizes emotional involvement, body resonance, and contextual awareness, and possesses strong subjective authenticity and emotional depth.

In contrast, formal analysis, aesthetic criticism, or technical evaluation requires audiences to engage in rational analysis and judgment, focusing on aspects such as the work's structure, medium use, and stylistic strategies. Such activities typically require temporary withdrawal from emotional involvement and rely on conceptual understanding and theoretical perspective.

The types of epistemic values elicited by these two dimensions are inconsistent. The former tends to foster ethical awareness, empathy, or individual reflection, while the latter focuses more on clear understanding, a structural perspective, and style recognition. In many cases, enhancing the epistemic effectiveness of one

dimension may sacrifice the integrity of the other. As Frank Sibley once said, "yet it has more often been verdicts and their justification that have attracted attention, these other judgements being treated only in passing [12]". For example, a technical analysis of a picture full of emotional tension may weaken its appeal, while completely immersing oneself in the poetic atmosphere may overlook the work's structural composition within its cultural context.

The second involves authenticity versus clarity. It stems from the ambiguity and polysemy of expressive forms. Many works, especially symbolist poetry, abstract painting, and some experimental films, reject clear semantic structures and embrace ambiguous, non-linear, and multi-referential forms to evoke more complex and subtle emotional experiences. These works have a high degree of emotional authenticity in their expression, and their "ambiguity" itself reflects the depth of emotion and the complexity of experience [13].

From the perspective of conceptual clarity and semantic coherence, such works are difficult to "translate" into normative language, and thus face difficulties in academic criticism, theoretical discourse, and public communication. The strong correlation between emotional authenticity and linguistic ambiguity means that the pursuit of genuine expression often comes at the expense of conceptual precision and logical coherence [14].

This trade-off highlights the tension between two epistemic goods: on one hand, the faithful representation and communication of complex emotions and "authenticity"; on the other, the clear explanation of the work's structure and meaning and "clarity". When engaging with such works, aesthetic judges must decide whether to preserve the irreducible emotional texture of the piece or fit it into a framework of clear interpretation.

This insight forms the theoretical foundation for the concept of "epistemic trade-offs" proposed in this paper. In aesthetic judgment, individuals often face choices between emotional immersion and rational analysis. This choice is not entirely free or neutral. Still, it is deeply influenced by context, purpose, and evaluation criteria. Understanding the dual structure of aesthetic judgment not only claries the complexity of aesthetic experience but also provides a theoretical basis for evaluating the value of different epistemic pathways.

4. Normative proposal: optimizing epistemic goods

In the face of conflicts among different epistemic goods in aesthetic judgments, epistemic consequentialism provides an outcome-oriented evaluative framework. At its core, "Epistemic consequentialism suggests a theory according to which whether a belief is justified or unjustified depends on the none-pistemic goodness or badness of the consequences of believing it [15]". In the context of aesthetics, this implies that the validity of a judgment or interpretation should be assessed on the basis of its tangible cognitive contributions—such as whether it fosters understanding, stimulates reflection, or enhances critical awareness—rather than on its adherence to predefined forms or methods.

However, the complexity of artistic cognition lies precisely in the fact that different epistemic goods often cannot be "simultaneously achieved" [16]. As previously noted, Emotional resonance may come at the expense of analytical clarity, and cultural sensitivity may undermine cross-cultural consistency. This assumption gives rise to what is termed "epistemic trade-offs". Under the framework of consequentialism, the question is not "which epistemic good is absolutely correct", but: in a given context, which judgment path can achieve the optimal cognitive outcome [17]?

To address this challenge, this paper proposes a processing mechanism with aggregate epistemic optimization as the core. The foundational framework of this mechanism encompasses the following key aspects:

First, the Identification and weighting of multidimensional epistemic values is an indispensable initial step. The consequentialist model requires identifying and delineating the epistemic goods that specific aesthetic judgments may achieve. These values may include but are not limited to: truth-conduciveness, understandability, affective insight, critical reflection, and cultural receptivity. In practice, these values must be weighted and prioritized based on the artwork's context, purpose, audience, and characteristics.

For instance, when encountering politically charged installation art, critical reflection and cultural context may be more important than formal accuracy as exemplified by Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*, which addressed the intersections of sugar production, colonialism, and racial exploitation. In this work, the conceptual weight of the sugar sculpture overshadows its formal accuracy, such as anatomical correctness. The installation demands critical reflection on the history of slavery, the sugar trade's role in colonial exploitation, and systemic racism, prioritizing an understanding of the African diaspora's cultural context and the Domino Sugar Factory's historical significance as a site of labor exploitation over the sculpture's technical precision. Conversely, in the technically complex classical music, tructural comprehension and technical evaluation might yield greater epistemic benefits. Different judgment objectives correspond to different "cognitive priority structures", which is the initial step of consequentialist evaluation [18].

Secondly, rule-based epistemic evaluation is an important step. In order to avoid falling into the arbitrariness of individual judgment, this paper advocates the adoption of rule-consequentialism rather than the behavioral version. Specifically, this approach does not directly evaluate the immediate outcomes of each judgment behavior. Still, it considers whether the cognitive rules behind it, such as "prioritizing immersive experience", "paying attention to cultural context", or "keeping concepts clear", have improved overall cognitive quality in long-term practice. For example, when analyzing ambiguous poetry, one might choose the rule of "prioritizing ambiguous emotional expression" instead of forcibly parsing its meaning, but the rationality of this rule is not based on the success of individual texts, but on its epistemic performance in similar text groups. This mechanism provides a repeatable and reflective operational framework for epistemic evaluation. As Emily Dickinson once wrote in *Tell all the truth but tell it slant*, "*Tell all the truth but tell it slant; Success in Circuit lies*" (lines 1–2) [19]. In this poem, Dickinson explores how truth is communicated through metaphor and structural ambiguity. The ambiguity of the poem is reflected in the polysemy of its metaphors and the uncertainty of its structure, allowing the reader to interpret it in various ways. By adopting the rule of "prioritizing ambiguous emotional expression", readers are encouraged to experience the emotional resonance and cognitive exploration of the poem without imposing a precise meaning. This approach promotes deeper emotional resonance and cognitive engagement, as readers gain a deeper understanding of the poem as they explore its multiple layers of meaning and emotional nuances.

Third, establish minimum epistemic thresholds and conduct counterfactual comparisons. While epistemic consequentialism emphasizes flexibility, minimum cognitive thresholds must be set to avoid all emotional or arbitrary judgments from being included in the category of epistemic benefit [20]. To preserve the integrity of epistemological evaluation, aesthetic judgments must meet certain basic criteria. First, judgments should be reflexive, prompting evaluators to reconsider their understanding of themselves or the world. Second, they must be communicable, with the potential to be understood and discussed by others within a shared epistemological framework. Third, judgments should demonstrate counterfactual comparability, demonstrating their superiority in epistemic consequences compared to other evaluation paths. These criteria not only define valid epistemic outcome but also ensure consequentialist models do not degenerate into "epistemic hedonism" or relativistic aesthetics.

In summary, epistemic consequentialism provides a process-oriented and normatively constrained analytical framework for cognitive conflicts in aesthetic judgments. Through the model of "aggregate epistemic optimization", value priorities in specific judgments can be clarified, appropriate cognitive rules selected, and dynamic adjustments implemented through the consequence evaluation system. This mechanism is both theoretically consistent and practical explanatory.

5. Case study: moral ambiguity in film

To illustrate how cognitive trade-offs operate in aesthetic judgment, this paper selects two representative art forms—film narrative and abstract painting—as case studies. The common feature of these forms is that they usually trigger strong emotional responses while simultaneously challenging traditional frameworks of formal analysis, thus highlighting the tension structure of epistemic trade-offs. Through detailed analysis, the extent to which different judgmental paths exhibit greater epistemic justification is explored.

From the perspective of film narrative, this paper analyzes two widely acclaimed contemporary films— Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*—as case studies. These two works not only have distinct artistic styles but also present a deep tension between emotional empathy and moral cognition in aesthetic experience, providing a concrete context for the "aggregate epistemic optimization" model proposed in this paper.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind tells the story of a couple, Joel and Clementine, who undergo a procedure to erase their memories of each other after a painful breakup, only to rediscover their love as they forget [21]. The film evokes strong emotional resonance through its nonlinear narrative, dreamlike visuals, and sincere portrayal of love and loss. This immersive experience deepens the audiences emotional understanding of memory, attachment, and the fragility of interpersonal relationships.

However, from a rational analysis perspective, the film raises profound ethical and philosophical questions about memory and identity. Is it ethical to erase painful memories, even if they shape individual identity? If love is rebuilt based on forgotten pain, can it still be authentic? This emotional journey may deeply move audiences. Still, they are also faced with cognitive uncertainty: Should the authenticity of unfiltered experience be valued, or should emotional health be prioritized through selective forgetting? Here, the cognitive conflict between emotional authenticity and ethical discernment constitutes a clear epistemic trade-off.

Compared to Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Parasite employs black humor and social satire to reveal the tension inherent in class structures, and its narrative strategy is more structural and critical [22]. From a cognitive standpoint, the audience can clearly grasp the multiple meanings of the "parasitic" metaphor in the film and form a complex understanding of social injustice [23].

However, the film deliberately creates ambiguity in its moral stance. For example, the ethical boundaries between the poor and the rich are constantly blurred, and acts of violence and sacrifice are presented without clear moral judgments. This approach certainly enhances cognitive complexity, but also leaves the audience emotionally conflicted and complicates clear moral assessments. In other words, the film strengthens the cognitive path of structural analysis and social criticism, while diminishing the stability of emotional resonance and ethical attribution. Therefore, the most epistemic justification-based way of judgment should be to embed a "multidimensional evaluation path" of structural reflection while respecting the complexity of emotions, not only asking "how does this make me feel" but also "what does this mean" and "what assumptions does it challenge".

Both films highlight mutually exclusive cognitive pathways: when a work strengthens individual experience through emotional engagement, it often sacrifices structural rationality and moral clarity; In

contrast, in works that emphasize analytical depth and social criticism, it is easy to undermine the audience's empathy. These specific cases demonstrate that, in aesthetic judgment, different cognitive values cannot be maximized simultaneously and must be optimized and selected through context-specific strategies.

The "aggregate epistemic optimization" model proposed in this paper does not aim to establish a uniform standard for artistic experience but instead encourages a deliberate process of coordination and reflection among multiple cognitive values [24].

Abstract painting, particularly in the works of Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin, demonstrates how visual art can transcend the limitations of language to evoke profound emotional and contemplative experiences.

Mark Rothko's color field paintings, with large areas of color and subtle color transitions, form minimalist patterns, aiming to stimulate the audience's inner emotional responses to "nothingness" [25]. His use of color and form seeks to create an immersive experience that invites viewers into a meditative state, prompting introspection and emotional resonance. Agnes Martin's minimalist compositions, with subtle lines and almost meditative balanced structures, foster a sense of tranquility and spiritual reflection [26]. Her paintings are defined as "an essay on introspection and silence", emphasizing the conveyance of deep emotions and spiritual experiences through simple forms [27].

The works of these artists show that abstract painting not only challenges the expressive power of language but also provides a form of understanding and experience through visual and emotional means.

Such artistic experiences are often described as "profound understanding in the failure of language": the audience may struggle to explain the artwork's content with clear conceptual terms. Still, it may gain an intrinsic understanding of self, existence, or order [28]. This form of understanding constitutes a deeply emotional epistemic good, reflected in the grasp of non-propositional meaning and in sensitivity to emotions, rhythms, order, and the essence of silence.

However, an analytical approach focused on traditional formalism or cognitive clarity may overlook or even undermine this experience. For instance, a technical analysis of Rothko's color distribution or a proportional measurement of Martin's geometric repetitions may be "correct". Still, it may disconnect from the meaning-generating mechanism of the audience's experience. Here, the trade-off between immersive experience and analytical judgment is evident: the former enhances affective insight, while the latter emphasizes conceptual accuracy. According to the "aggregate epistemic optimization" framework, if the goal of judgment is to stimulate reflection and enhance the sense of existence, the former is clearly more epistemic justification. If the aim is to compare works or study styles, the latter is more reasonable.

From narrative films to abstract paintings, it becomes evident that, across different types of artistic experiences, epistemic trade-offs are not incidental disruptions but an integral part of the judgment structure. When audiences make an aesthetic evaluation, they are effectively engaging in a weighted selection of different epistemic goods. From the perspective of epistemic consequentialism, the analytical focus extends beyond "Is it liked?" and "Is it understood?" to the deeper dimension of "Does it foster cognitive growth?", thereby enabling a more systematic assessment of the legitimacy of judgment.

6. Response to objection

Although epistemic consequentialism offers a systematic evaluation framework for aesthetic judgment, its normative status and scope of application still face several significant challenges. This section responds to this challenge through three key questions: the epistemic value of subjective experience, the risk of pluralism devolving into relativism, and the issue of stability in normative standards.

One frequent criticism is that the subjectivity of aesthetic experience questions whether all subjective emotions can be transformed into meaningful cognitive resources [29]. For instance, does a purely pleasurable or fearful response necessarily yield cognitive benefits? Not all emotional states possess epistemic value—a threshold must be met to ensure their contribution to cognitive growth.

In response, this paper proposes using "minimal epistemic thresholds" as a baseline standard for identifying aesthetic experiences with epistemic value [30]. An emotional experience is considered to possess epistemic value only when it meets two conditions: reflectivity, meaning it triggers self-examination or a shift in the recipient's understanding of the world; and communicability, the experience can be expressed and explained to a certain extent, and trigger the understanding or response of others. Only emotional experiences that fulfill these conditions have the potential to contribute to knowledge.

Another key question arises: since this paper recognizes the diversity of cognitive values, does this imply a lack of unified evaluation standards, thereby leading to cognitive relativism [31]? Particularly when confronting contemporary art characterized by distinct styles and ambiguous expressions, if each experience is deemed "reasonable in its own way", the challenge remains: how can the normativity of judgment be maintained [32]?

This paper argues that diversity does not equate to relativism. While cognitive values possess dimensional diversity (such as emotional insight, structural understanding, and moral sensitivity), this does not exclude relatively consistent evaluations through "context-sensitive rules" [33]. For instance, in emotionally driven works, the evaluation can focus on whether they evoke reflection and empathy; for structurally complex works, the evaluation can examine their capacity to enhance understanding and critical awareness. Through such "rule-constrained comparative evaluations", the diversity of artistic cognition is respected while maintaining a certain rationality of evaluation [34].

A third challenge must also be addressed. The criticism that epistemic consequentialism lacks stable norms primarily stems from its reliance on outcomes. In aesthetic contexts, the effects of artworks are often ambiguous, delayed, or subjective, which makes it difficult to clearly define "outcomes". Consequently, critics argue that epistemic consequentialism may fail to provide a priori, stable normative frameworks. However, supporters advocate introducing a rule-constrained comparative evaluation mechanism that establishes clear cognitive rules and comparative standards to maintain the normativity and consistency of judgments. This approach emphasizes the reasonable evaluation of artworks by applying regulations across diverse aesthetic practices, thereby addressing concerns about the lack of stable norms in epistemic consequentialism.

In response to the lack of stable norms in epistemic consequentialism, this paper advocates adopting a "rule-consequentialism" framework [35]. This theory emphasizes guiding aesthetic judgment by evaluating the overall epistemic efficacy of belief-forming rules in long-term practice, rather than focusing solely on the immediate outcomes of individual judgments [36]. This approach facilitates the establishment of a more predictable and normatively consistent evaluative system.

In the context of aesthetic judgment, a series of rules can be established to guide practice, such as encouraging interactive interpretations of emotions and structures, prioritizing the reflective potential of experiences, and avoiding evaluations based on a single dimension [37]. The adoption of these rules is not based on intuition, but rationally selected through repeated verification and the comparison of their aggregate epistemic effects. This renders aesthetic judgment not only theoretically consistent but also practical and explanatory.

In summary, while epistemic consequentialism inevitably faces theoretical challenges when applied to aesthetic judgment, "transformative constraints, rule stability and the establishment of threshold criteria", this

approach enables us to criticize relativism and subjectivism and construct a cognitive evaluation system that is both open and normative, theoretically coherent, and practically operable [38].

7. Conclusion

As a unique cognitive activity between emotional experience and analytical reasoning, aesthetic judgment exhibits a complex and changeable internal structure. This paper points out that in real-world aesthetic practices, audiences and critics frequently face a variety of epistemic trade-offs, that is, tensions and conflicts between different epistemic goods, such as emotional resonance, structural understanding, moral sensitivity, and and cultural positioning [39]. These cognitive values are not always coordinated, but constrain each other in many judgment scenarios, and even present mutually exclusive choices. The difficulty of aesthetic judgment lies precisely in the balance, trade-off, and choice between these competing values [40].

To address this dilemma, this paper advocates adopting epistemic consequentialism as a theoretical framework. This theoretical framework grounds the legitimacy of beliefs or judgments in the cognitive consequences they produce, offering a way of thinking that starts from outcomes and dynamically evaluates them, allowing us to make reasonable choices among multiple cognitive paths. By distinguishing between "act-based" and "rule-based" consequentialism and adopting the latter as the dominant model, this paper addresses key critiques, such as the cognitive status of emotional experiences and the risk of cognitive relativism, while introducing an "aggregate epistemic optimization" mechanism [41]. This mechanism emphasizes the coordination of multiple cognitive goals as the guiding value in complex aesthetic contexts.

Furthermore, this paper proposes constructing a "flexible epistemic evaluation framework" for contemporary art and cultural practices [42]. This framework recognizes the contextual and diverse nature of aesthetic cognition while establishing minimal epistemic thresholds and normative principles to avoid falling into non-normative subjectivism or arbitrary evaluation. This evaluation model is not only applicable to art forms such as abstract painting, experimental film, and cross-cultural narrative but also provides theoretical support and methodological inspiration for related fields such as critical practice and art education.

In conclusion, the epistemic trade-offs in aesthetic judgment are not obstacles to cognitive activity but rather the most direct manifestation of cognitive complexity. Adopting a consequentialist perspective clarifies the structures and value foundations of these conflicts, advancing aesthetic theory toward a more sophisticated, flexible, and normative direction [43]. Future research could further explore the applicability and limitations of this framework in cross-cultural aesthetics, non-traditional art forms, and technology-generated art, continuously expanding the theoretical boundaries of aesthetic judgment as a cognitive form.

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