In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin emphasises the revolutionary potentiality of cinema: oppressive tradition is dismantled, and the spectator is freed from the shackles of “auratic” time and experience. However, there is an undeniable ambivalence in Benjamin’s philosophy of time and experience, one that has been described as “the return of the auratic.” Such ambiguity can be articulated through the cinema of Werner Herzog. Like Baudelaire’s poetry, Herzog’s images both destroy the aura, and evoke its return. As auratic artworks, Herzog’s films side with the time of boredom, but they do so within an art form arrested by distraction. Timeliness makes a return to the cinema, but cinema does not return to tradition. Quite differently, time returns to Herzog’s cinema ambiguously, and ferociously, in the rubble of tradition. Cinematic experience is neither entirely distracting, nor is it strictly boring either, imitating Baudelaire again, something “lived through” is given the “weight of experience.”

Being bored has never been so distracting. So distracting, perhaps, that boredom can no longer be experienced by a modern audience. If this is so, then the modern experience of boredom is never without ambiguity. Unreliable in theory, the word is nevertheless frequently used, and “boredom” seems to be as relevant now as ever. In the context of cinema, it is often said that films are boring; and what’s more, certain filmmakers even make boredom their project. From the avant-garde to the post modern, certain directors have attempted to “take away” from modern experience, rather than repeat or add to it. These films are slow rather than fast, and it becomes conceivable to sit in front of a single shot of the Empire State Building for 8 hours. But the subject of this essay is Werner Herzog, not Andy Warhol, and Herzog’s films do not sit comfortably within the genre of “slow cinema,” then again, his films do not sit comfortably in any genre at all. Nevertheless, his films still have a relationship to boredom, and not simply because people say that Herzog’s films are boring. Many say that they are not boring at all. Boredom steps into Herzog’s films as a matter of time, and with this time, the following essay will link Herzog to Walter Benjamin’s theory of modern experience as distraction. Just as boredom is different from distraction, Herzog is an inappropriate exemplar of Benjamin’s theory of cinema. Yet for
all that Werner is Walter’s adversary, there is also a more obscured camaraderie between them. For Herzog brings all the ambiguity to the state of boredom, which I propose, is also present within Benjamin’s theory of distraction.

Herzog is the strange master of the boring image. He does not represent the world, so much as he plasticises it, making it flat, removed, and as boring as pornography. Realism is always dishonest to Herzog. He has published a short manifesto condemning cinema verité, and no matter how ironic or silly this “Minnesota Declaration” might appear, Herzog is quite serious about his distrust of the “accountant’s truth.” Written in 15 minutes, the document was motivated by television and sleeplessness. Disgusted by the “boring” and “uninspired” documentaries on every channel, he switched the television off, but still unable to sleep, he switched it back on: “There was a porno film on and I had the feeling, yes, even though it’s just a physical performance, it comes closer to what I call truth. It was more truthful than those documentaries.”

The rejection of verité is also a rejection of proximity. Like pornography, Herzog’s documentaries are always performances, reality is made into image, not the other way around. His camera never captures things, so much as it is used to distance them. Thus, rather than using the camera to bring the spectator closer to the world, Herzog does the exact opposite. Frequently filming from the sky, at a vast distance, or in a tracking shot, the camera’s perspective is not proximate or everyday. Withdrawn, the earth’s landscapes become foreign, and distorted beyond what they are. The camera does not act as an intermediary, it is more like a god, soaring above, or rushing past. Herzog sees himself as a visionary, and perhaps his fans do too, but unlike other so-called “visionary” filmmakers (Bergman for example), Herzog rarely goes “close-up.” He is not thoughtful, and he refuses to investigate. Herzog just films, and in this way, he is a passive filmmaker; he offers no depth to his images, because he passes no comment, and never tries to probe. What’s more, without a zoom, things become static, they have no perspectival depth and begin to seem flat. The world no longer resembles itself, instead it is flattened to an image. As we shall see, this distancing is rejected by the Benjaminian cameraman who brings objects up close rather than pushes them away. Not only does the distancing of the image attempt to reinstate auratic concepts to the mechanically reproduced artwork, it also reintroduces a sense of time that is quite alien to modernity.

Modernity is constructed in a series of discontinuous moments; continuity and timeliness are impossible here. Any attempts for time must be deceitful, and this accusation would please Herzog, for his notoriety depends on his villainy. Personal exploits aside, Herzog’s deceit can also be framed in temporal terms. In regards to time, his films stand as attempts to circumvent the necessarily momentary presence of the cinematic image. Herzog does not