



THE PRODIGALS

A FAMILY PORTRAIT

By Patrick Foster



INTRODUCTION

This short film entitled *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021) is a love letter to photography, presenting an hypothetical epilogue to the *Parable of The Prodigal Son*.¹ My work involves comparison and feelings of inadequacy, much like the older brother. Occasionally, I experience undeserved success, similar to the younger brother. Exposing my inner conflict over warring creative impulses, this is a story of sibling rivalry and opinions about inheritance and self-perception.

Cover image: *Sister* in *The Prodigals* (2021)
1. (Left) Patrick Foster, *Brother* (2021)



BACKGROUND

Since my identity is inextricably tied to photographic images through my heirloom Leica M3², photography is a way of life. As a Christian, I took to reading scripture to resolve my self-image. *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* inspired me to use sibling rivalry, identity and inheritance as themes in my film.

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

My Leica M3 was inherited from my father, who inherited it from my grandfather. As the eldest son, I expected to inherit it. Instead, I asked for it, akin to the prodigal son. The context of inheritance in the *Parable* became a core inspiration since it has provided spiritual motivation for many years.

² The Leica M3, a 35 mm camera by Ernst Leitz GmbH was launched in 1954. With a combined viewfinder and rangefinder and a bayonet lens mount, it was the most successful M series model ever until production ceased in 1966 (http://www.lustriguez.es/fotos/cameras/leica_m3/index-leica_m3.htm).

2. (Above) Patrick Foster, *Cameras at Masterclass* (2021)
3. (Below) Patrick Foster, *Inheritance* (2021)
4. (Opposite) Patrick Foster, *Father* (2021)





THEMATIC INSPIRATION

Mindful that nostalgia undermines my work, I refined my methodologies and yet I was drawn towards stories and motifs with deeper familial connotations, over my initial plans for parody and satire.

The Parable is not exclusively about the younger son but is perceived as a family affair. The eldest son, disgusted by his sibling's debauchery and, despite the father's entreaties, disengages. Since the parable ends unresolved, I interpret this as an appeal from Jesus to resolve it in our own lives. My film concerns a desire for reconciliation and a new perception of value between the siblings as a metaphor for the struggle to resolve my conflicting self-image. I commenced with a self-critical examination of my shortcomings as an artist and photographer. By splitting myself, I expose my inner conflict as two siblings with the choice to accept a situation, or to work diligently towards its resolution.

5. (Opposite) Patrick Foster, *Waiting* (2021)
6. (Left) Patrick Foster, *Passage* (2021)



RESEARCH

Certain photographic metaphors emerged through Sontag’s *On Photography* (2005). For instance, Sontag (2005:2) proposes that gaze of the photographer, through the lens, justifies the subject’s existence: a key motif in my film. In the *Parable*, the eldest brother sought affirmation. In *The Prodigals* (2021) the younger brother knows this and uses power of the camera to acknowledge his sister.

According to Sontag (2005:124), the camera becomes a device to mirror reality, stylised by the photographer. Photojournalist Salgado³ states: “Photography is the language that gives people the opportunity to see what you saw.”⁴ The photographer’s will is stylised through focus and composition (Sontag 2005:132) to elicit feelings by directing the viewer’s gaze.

My film represents the older sibling’s narrative as the dominant perspective through a semi-surreal scenario enabling the viewer to photographically access her emotional responses.

I purposefully used equipment that yielded shallow depth-of-field, high contrast images and control of the focal plane as a visual language. Though out her book, Sontag uses “look” to describe the photographic principle of focus and importance (Sontag 2005:1-164). Thematically used in my film, the direction of the camera cues the viewer’s focus.

3 In 1985 Salgado won the Oskar Barnack Award for his series on famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s (<https://www.leica-oskar-barnack-award.com/en/winners/winner-1985-sebastio-salgado.html>).

4 (<https://www.canon.co.za/pro/stories/sebastiao-salgado-photojournalism/>).

7. Patrick Foster, film location (2021)





8. (Above) Andrei Tarkovsky, film still from *Nostalgia* (1983)

9. (Opposite) Michael Mann, film still from *Collateral* (2004).

INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

Inspired by Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1975) and his strategies of slow, choreographed movements, when my characters moved, I moved the camera. When the characters were inanimate, so was the camera, unless emotional emphasis was required. Tarkovsky's films feature ambient scenes where landscape is pivotal⁵ I created a story using the landscape as a mode of delivery. This is evident where the protagonist travels through a nightscape pursuing a thief and eventually discovers her brother. Tarkovsky's voice-overs and dreamlike sequences influenced the visual style, writing and editing.

Michael Mann inspired a night-time aesthetic through his films, *Thief* (1981) and *Collateral* (2004). His use of contrast and empty night spaces inspired me to create a 'stage' for the story, while I also emulated his use of longer lenses to isolate characters and decrease the depth-of-field.



5 For example, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983) (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086022/>).



RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The film’s pre-production revolved around distilling and synthesising my thoughts for a short film. I comprehensively investigated The Parable, reading Nouwen’s book,⁶ referring to Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal Son⁷ (1661–1669) and its impact on his evaluation of onlookers in the painting. I articulated my thoughts: why does each character do what they do? Much of the process was one of self-discovery: who am I in the story, the Prodigal or the older brother?

Cyclical in process, I revised content and elements. Aware of overcomplications, I began to simplify and cut irrelevant content. Inspired by Nolan’s Memento⁸ (2000), I wished to intersperse past and current events but this proved unsuited to the important nostalgic sensibilities. I finally selected a linear timeline, using narration during past events, like Tarkovsky. I decided on single character shots for dialogue to avoid potential continuity issues, should a character be removed.

IN PRACTICE

My film uses photographic elements as motifs for meaning and as aesthetic strategies. My Leica camera is the heirloom and desired object of the narrative, as in my life. Intentional images of the Leica and other cameras, my father’s clicking pen and glasses, the stretched rubber band, a heavy bag and a pair of lizards are used as strategies to affect perception. The film was shot between May and September, usually at night. Sometimes a scene would take two nights, giving me the opportunity for rough edits, and a quick turnaround for reshoots. Lightweight camera equipment, fast lenses⁹ and hand-held lighting ensured that time sensitive issues were resolved. Footage was edited with DaVinci Resolve.

6 Henri Nouwens, The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming (1994:6-18).

7 Rembrandt van Rijn, The Return of the Prodigal Son. (http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt%27s_prodigal_son.html)

8 Christopher Nolan, Memento (2000).

9 All camerawork was done exclusively on Nikon Z7 cameras at 4K with larger aperture lenses to ensure shallower depth-of-field and lower light capabilities.

10. Patrick Foster, *Elastic* (2021)



MY WORK

The Prodigals: a family portrait (2021) is set in the present, where an unnamed protagonist recalls her past and confronts challenging questions about her identity. The narrative centres on sibling rivalry, inheritance and self-perception. It aimed to mature my photographic journey, aligning familial perspective within the context of my faith, specifically the spiritual questions of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The reconciliation of the siblings was an endeavour to experience personal harmony as an artist. Learning to love what the father loves (Luke 15, NIV) helps me grow beyond the dualisms of hard work and luck, to simply love myself. Using focus, depth-of-field and composition, the viewer can read my photographic language throughout the film. The camera is a metaphor for the gaze and a worldview, used literally and figuratively as a storytelling device. As a film-making artist, my sensibilities were influenced by Tarkovsky and Mann, expanding my vocabulary and sense of the mechanisms of film as intentional and aesthetically effective. These methodologies enabled self-assessment, to arrive at a more amicable reflection of myself.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover image: *Sister* in *The Prodigals* (2021)

1. Patrick Foster, *Brother* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
2. Patrick Foster, *Cameras at Masterclass* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
3. Patrick Foster, *Inheritance* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
4. Patrick Foster, *Father* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
5. Patrick Foster, *Waiting* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
6. Patrick Foster, *Passage* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
7. Patrick Foster, film location still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
8. Andrei Tarkovsky, film still from *Nostalgia* (1983)
9. Michael Mann, film still from *Collateral* (2004).
10. Patrick Foster, *Elastic* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).
11. Patrick Foster, *My Leica* film still from *The Prodigals: a family portrait* (2021)
(Where the film can be accessed online).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Collateral (2004) Directed by Michael Mann [Film]. Paramount Pictures, Dreamworks Pictures, Parkes/MacDonald Productions, Edge City.

Memento (2000) Directed by Christopher Nolan [Film]. Newmarket Capital Group, Team Todd, I Remember Productions, Summit Entertainment.

Nostalghia (1983) Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky [Film]. Moscow: Mosfilm, Sovinfilm and RAI 2.

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1994) *The return of the prodigal son: A story of homecoming*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Sontag, S. 2005. *On Photography*. Digital Edition. New York: Rosetta.

Stalker (1979) Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky [Film]. Mosfilm, Vtoroe Tvorcheskoe Obedinenie.

Thief (1981) Directed by Michael Mann [Film]. Mann/Caan Productions.

van Rijn, R. c. 1661–1669 *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Oil on canvas 262 cm × 205 cm. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Production Crew:

Camerawork
Francois Van Vuuren
(iFlair Photography)
Hannes Naude
Egon Bramley
Caleb Mos
Patrick Foster

Sound
Egon Bramley
Caleb Mos
Patrick Foster

Grips and Assistants
JP Schmidt
David Stance
Franzel Broodryk

Music
Gregor Zelder

Name of the Night by Kisnou
Licensed by UPPBEÁT.io
2021

Corals Under the Sun (instrumental)
by Sivan Talmor
Licensed by ARTLIST.io
2021

Street Walking by Shahead Mostahafar
Licensed by ARTLIST.io
2021

Reflections on the Water by
Spearfisher featuring Dyebright
Licensed by ARTLIST.io
2021

Cast:

Sister
Nelien Smith

Brother
Patrick Foster

Father
Prof. Richard Nichol

Model
Hannah Titmas

Studio extras
Ellie Huan
Senzo Buthelezi
Alice Novotorzhina
Nico Van Der Walt
Sharone Marais
Renske Beetge
Monique Foster
Promise Masiako
Joshua Du Plessis

Lizzard Handler
Jaden Van Heyningen

Print Shop Owner
Hannes Naude

Clowns
Dean Schouw
Gerhard Slabbert Jnr

Mime
Lourens Strydom

Theatre Narrator
Patrick Foster

Theatre Enthusiast
Egon Bramley

Theatre Extras
WP Wahl
Siobhone Wahl
Milcah Wahl
Joshua Wahl
Judah Wahl

Mimes in the Passage
Caleb Mos
John Dean Knell
David Starnes
Wynand Olivier
Nico Potgieter
Franzel Broodryk

Dark Voice
Patrick Foster

Mugger
JP Schmidt

Crowd of Ladies
Carmen Bornman
Sharone Marias
Renske Beetge
Shante de Beer
Promise Masiako
Mathapelo Ntshali
Anthea Andrews
Liné Vorster
Yolandi Joubert
Ashey Hannie
Nadia Van Der Merwe

Masterclass participants
Caleb Mos
Ruth Akintola
JJ Reynders
Leander Farrel

Edited by Patrick Foster

RESUMÉ

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 2004 | Matriculated. Examination artwork exhibited at the National Exhibition, Northwood School, Durban. |
| 2013 | Co-creation of abuse awareness short films for Engo social workers' programme |
| 2015-2018 | Lead actor in <i>Blood Speaks</i> theatre production Performing Arts Council (PACOFs), Bloemfontein |
| 2017 | Collaboration with Shalom Ministries for official <i>IT'S TIME</i> documentary |
| 2021 | Unisa BVA Graduate Online Exhibition (02305 - MV1) |

CONTACT DETAILS

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