Trauma theory, with its foregrounding of concepts, including flashbacks and latency, has emphasised the continuing and damaging impact of trauma’s past on the present. On trauma theory’s account, the present is held hostage to an over-present—if unmasterable—past. My aim in this paper will be to reconfigure memory’s relations with trauma so that not only memory’s but trauma’s relations with the present—and hence with the future—become a little more evident. This will involve a re-thinking of trauma as it has come to be understood by trauma theory. I’ll be attempting this reconfiguring of understandings of trauma through the medium of the cinema and in the context of a reading of one psychoanalytic thinker—Jean Laplanche—whose writings have not been drawn on as extensively as they might have been in the version of trauma theory that has become canonical in the humanities.

The paper will begin by discussing critically three key elements of the version of trauma theory that has become influential within the humanities: First, its understanding of the relationship between culture and actuality; second, the relationship it posits between academics, audiences and texts; and, third, its relations with the politics of the present. The paper’s second section will describe the paths I have been following in the book project from which this paper draws. Getting Over Trauma’s interrogation of trauma theory mobilises two different strategies. First, it looks elsewhere—focusing on a range of films that would not be considered to belong within the paradigm of the trauma film. Second, it looks differently at a range of films that might be, or have been included within that paradigm. The paper will focus, in the main, on this second strategy, illustrating the project’s practice of looking differently by means of a discussion of Michael Haneke’s controversial film Caché/Hidden (2005).

Part art movie, part thriller, Caché concerns itself with a middle class Parisian couple who start receiving packages on their doorstep that contain video surveillance footage shot secretly from their street, accompanied by strange, childish drawings. With its scenes of incomprehensible violence and its violations of classical temporal ordering and frequency, Caché’s routine treatment as trauma film is unsurprising. In this paper, however, I take a different path. Beginning from the contrast between the amount of discussion prompted by the film and the sense of stalled conversation and communication conveyed by the film, the paper proposes that Caché might be read in relation to Laplanche’s theory of enigmatic signification. Laplanche’s theory revises both the earlier Freud of hysteria and the seduction theory and the later Freud of unconscious fantasy, producing unique understandings of temporality, culture and meaning-making. The paper will illustrate the contributions of Laplanchian theory to our thinking about trauma and past/present relations before ending with a question about whether we can adopt a Laplanchian perspective without violating that theory’s own resistance to ‘filling in’ meaning.