Wulf Kansteiner (Aarhus University)
“The Cosmopolitan Dilemma: Migration and the Politics of Forgetting in Contemporary Europe”

Cosmopolitan memory seems in decline all across Europe. The transition of WWII memory from communicative to cultural memory has reduced attachment to the Holocaust narrative. In addition, the dynamics of digital media tend to fragment public discourse, allegedly creating self-serving echo chambers of political confirmation bias, on the one hand, and highly emotionized arenas of political confrontation, on the other, thus destabilizing the previous cosmopolitan consensus. This lecture will put these hypotheses to the test by analyzing the political discourse and memory regimes about migration that were distributed by Germany’s political parties via the web and their social media platforms in the spring of 2019. The analysis suggests that balkanization and historization of memory cultures might contribute to the malaise but that cosmopolitan memory has first and foremost fallen victim to its own contradictions and lack of democratic and emotional legitimacy. Moreover, the images and narratives of cosmopolitan memory have been coopted for the purpose of providing memory plausibility to the nationalistic project of ending immigration to Europe.

Wulf Kansteiner is Professor of Memory Studies and Historical Theory at Aarhus University. Trained in Germany and the US, he has published widely in the fields of Holocaust studies, media history, historical theory, and memory studies. Co-Editor and co-Founder of Memory Studies (published since 2008), he also has extensive experience in building and directing international and interdisciplinary research teams in memory studies. He is the author of In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz (2006); co-editor with Claudio Fogu (UCSB) of The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe (2006); Historical Representation and Historical Truth (2009); Den Holocaust erzählen? Historiographie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Empirie und narrativer Kreativität (2012), and with Claudio Fogu and Todd Pressner, Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture (2016).