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## Perpetual Revolution

James Buzard

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## Perpetual Revolution

James Buzard

Because I do not hope to turn again . . .  
T. S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930)

### I.

Contrary to the expectations that might be engendered by its title, this essay does not concern itself in any way with unorthodox Marxist theories of history and society; nor does it so much as advert, except in this sentence, to any of the conflicts—1789, 1830, 1848—that made up the so-called “Age of Revolutions” in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe. No, the subject of the present article conveys none of the drama and grand narrative sweep associated with those ideas and events, though like them it has, in its way, organized the experience of modernity. I am referring to the revolving door, an unsung but pervasive—dare one say *pivotal*—technology for modern living. It has been slighted by most historians of architecture, by philosophers of the modern city, by historians of the department store, and even, bafflingly, by Gretl Hoffmann’s seemingly exhaustive *Doors: Excellence in International Design*, not to mention Val Clery’s ruminative, phenomenological essay, *Doors*.<sup>1</sup> Yet certain artists, writers, and filmmakers were quick to discern the symbolic suggestiveness residing in, and the cultural work performed by, the revolving door. In a dazzling essay on “The Use of Analogy in Legal and Political Argument,” Elaine Scarry takes the emergency hand brake found in railway passenger compartments as a “materialized locus of consent,” pointing out that, since the brake is accessible to any passenger at all times and

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560 since pulling its lever actually causes the train to stop (it does not send a signal to the engineer, but directly intervenes in the vehicle's operation), it "has no equivalent within any other form of transportation."<sup>2</sup> For me, the revolving door is just such an incomparable modern mechanism, similarly dependent upon individual participation and similarly replete with significance. Consisting typically of three or four glass panels inside a circular frame, the revolving door multiplies the possibilities of its "inherently ambiguous" plate glass by using it to reconfigure the space and experience of the threshold.<sup>3</sup> We are inured to the revolutionary nature of this architectural miracle, inside of which material and location, glass and threshold—each in its way "a field on which the exchange between inner and outer occurs, a field reflecting the violation of space but also enclosing and protecting"—achieve a powerful interaction through a particular distribution of space and motion inside the revolving door.<sup>4</sup> This "inside of which" calls for comment, for the revolving door is, of course, the only kind of door that is also a chamber, so that one can speak of being "inside the door." This renders it fundamentally different from the humble turnstile on which it is based.

The revolving door was the creation of one Theophilus Van Kannel (of Philadelphia), who on 7 August, 1888, received U.S. Patent number 387,571 for what he called his "New Revolving Storm Door," and who the following year was awarded the Franklin Institute's John Scott Legacy medal for useful inventions. In recommending this award, the Institute's Committee on Science and the Arts noted that "persons passing through [the new door] pass as through an ordinary turnstile," but its members recognized that, in boxing up the turnstile, Van Kannel had transformed it utterly, turning it into something like a mechanical lung for controlling the circulation of air and bodies alike. "At each one third turn of the door," they noted, "a volume of air equal to the space between two arms and from the floor to the roof of the door, is pumped out from the room to which it is attached and a similar volume of air is pumped in."<sup>5</sup> Van Kannel first began producing his new invention through the Storm-Proof Door Company of Philadelphia, and his earliest testimonials come from Philadelphia restaurants, dry goods stores, clothiers, as well as the city's Chamber of Commerce. Writing on 30 August, 1888, J. T. Harker, manager of Thackray's Restaurant, celebrated the door in terms that made plain its transcendence of the open turnstile:

In the coldest days during the great blizzard, we felt no discomfort, as it [the door] completely excludes the strongest wind, even while persons are passing in or out. Aside of its effecting a great saving of coal, it makes the front of the room as comfortable as other parts, thus adding to the availability of seating room. I at no time found any trouble in its use, a solid stream of persons passing in, and another out, without collision, and with much more freedom than the old-style swinging doors I had in use. The absence of all slamming, and the exclusion of street noises, are also an important feature.<sup>6</sup>

Starting in the 1890s, the Van Kannel door began to appear across both the architectural and the topological landscapes of America.<sup>7</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth century it had become a symbol, even a synecdoche, of modern American city life. When, in 1916, Man Ray resettled in Manhattan after a stint in small-town

New Jersey, he initiated the new urban, experimental phase in his career with *Revolving Doors* (1916–1917), a series of abstract collages hung on a hinged stand which spectators could turn as they wished. A spinning door might well have seemed a fitting emblem for modernity, since that condition was often described in terms of the “dizzying” changes it wrought upon traditional social orders, and since it was regularly evoked through images of rotation—Yeats’s “gyres,” Wyndham Lewis’s “Vorticism,” the chocolate grinder and orbiting bachelors of Duchamp’s *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, and so forth.

Our habit of associating the revolving door exclusively with the fast-paced, skyscrapered American city, however, may obscure a certain ambivalence in its original conception and early promotion that can usefully remind us of the door’s Victorian provenance.<sup>8</sup> It is true that Van Kannel himself sometimes addressed his public as an aggressive forward-thinker, disdainful of outmoded ways and means. In an early leaflet, the inventor somewhat irritably confronts the customary reaction to his door: “‘Just like a turn-stile,’ so say nine out of ten persons who first see it. As well may we say a tea-kettle is like a locomotive boiler.” Much of the leaflet is characterized by just this sort of pugnacious modernism. “In the old way,” Van Kannel recalls, “every person passing through [a door from the outside] first brings a chilling gust of wind with its snow, rain or dust, including the noise of the street; then comes the unwelcome ‘bang!’ This interesting programme is repeated in proportion to the number of callers. All these and many other annoyances are entirely obviated in the *New Revolving Storm Door*,” since “[each] person passing through the door pushes any one of its four wings forward, the wing behind him arriving at the curved side wall before the wing in front leaves it.”<sup>9</sup> As Reyner Banham points out in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, Van Kannel’s brainchild, which was initially marketed under the slogan “Always Closed,” constituted an important step on the way “toward full control” of atmospheric conditions inside of buildings—in other words, toward the creation of spaces finally independent of nature’s rhythms and constraints.<sup>10</sup>

And yet the inventor betrays a hint of Victorian double-voicedness about this prospect, some portion of his sympathies hankering to retain connection to, or dependency on, seasonal cycles. Van Kannel envisioned that in normal use his door would have “solid or glazed wings during the winter season and gauze or lattice wings during the summer” (“MEPA”). The very idea of fitting out a revolving door with gauze or lattice must strike us—for whom the glass is a definitive feature, part of the door’s cold, antihumanist appeal—as an atavistic absurdity, a misplaced piece of pastoral sentimentality. Still, one of the reasons Van Kannel gave why the wings of his doors had to be able to fold back and open a clear passageway was “to provide for the circulation of air in the event of . . . a suddenly warm day in the spring or fall, after the solid wings have been applied to the door” (“MEPA”). Like many another bourgeois Victorian, Van Kannel seems torn between the allure of the coming mechanical age and the currents of Romanticism still whispering the possibility of a natural humanity. His early fantasy—shocking to contemplate—that his invention might be installed not only in public buildings *but in private homes as well* is of a piece with the machine-age

562 domestic architecture parodied in Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1928): even to think of imposing the revolving door upon the suburban domicile seems an act of modernist totalitarianism worthy of Waugh's Professor Silenus, who despises "all the thoughts and self-approval of [the] biological by-product [humankind]" and who believes that "the only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men."<sup>11</sup> The dream that the revolving door could be "an ideal entrance closure for residences" persisted in Van Kannel promotional materials for many years: a catalogue probably dating from the 1930s is still rather half-heartedly pushing the idea, even though no private residences are listed on the appended "Abridged List of Buildings Equipped with Revolving Doors."<sup>12</sup> But Van Kannel's ardent-modernist side eventually acquiesced to the residual Victorian ideology of sacred domestic space. The Van Kannel door may have been "Always Closed," but, as its inventor eventually began to emphasize, it was "Always Open" as well, and the keepers of the American home declined to open their domestic sanctums to this "mechanical paradox."

Another sign of the revolving door's late Victorian origins is to be found in the nature of the claims put forward about it. It is not simply that these claims are inflated, but that they are inflated in such a way as to endow the effort to promote the installation of revolving doors with a moral grandeur comparable to that of the great nineteenth-century reformist projects, such as Chadwick's sanitation campaign. Under the heading "WILL IT PAY?" Van Kannel's early leaflet declares that the new door "will [not only] in a short time earn its cost in fuel [for heating], but it will do what is of far greater importance. *It will save life*, by preventing those deadly lung and throat diseases which are sure to overtake the unfortunate salesman, cashier or clerk whose duty keeps him near the *constantly opening front door*" ("MEPA," emphasis in original). The rhetoric of the early Victorian better-ventilation crusades, with its "noxious effluvia" and "baleful miasmas," is not far below the surface of such a passage. As Chadwick had done for the rookery-denzens of 1840s London and Manchester, Van Kannel will do for the turn of the century's new subclass of shop clerks, whose members are on the front lines of commerce and cannot evade the perilous influences of the streets.

Given such rhetorical affiliations, it is not wholly surprising to see a latter-day advocate of the Van Kannel door place his discussion of its merits in the framework of a Victorian-style comparative, evolutionist and universalist anthropology. This is what Robert L. Blanchard does in his remarkable *Around the World with Van Kannel* (2nd ed. 1930), a text whose size and imaginative scope—it is nearly a hundred pages long and contains dozens of photographs of Van Kannel doors on location in several countries—make it something like the *Golden Bough* of promotional literature. Blanchard's text is no mere catalogue but a fanciful tour of the world, stopping off wherever significant exhibits are to be found. "No matter where we go," Blanchard writes, "over land or sea . . . we meet one familiar thing. An accouterment that traces its birth to the earliest pages of history—the doorway, or entrance." Warming to his theme, the author continues:

Doors have ever been a necessity to man. They have been in use, in one form or another, since the early days when our ancestors lived in caves. . . . Entrance has always been a problem for man to solve. So important has been the matter that door is the one word that remains practically the same in all the Aryan languages. But what a variety of doors have been used.<sup>13</sup>

There then follow two-and-a-half pages of examples—bundles of furze, curtains of skin or cloth, slabs of stone, and so on—drawn from distant lands and times. All previous means of ingress are shown to have come into existence by the Middle Ages, but “thereafter, from medieval times down to 1890 . . . no step was taken to improve the usefulness of entrances” (AWVK, 9). The sorry state of doorway efficiency up to the end of the nineteenth century was damning evidence that “in one respect modern man had advanced but little from the cave-dweller” (AWVK, 81). Enter at last Van Kannel, with the invention—I quote verbatim here—“which completed man’s emancipation from the dark ages!” (AWVK, 81).

Its product a prominent jewel in the crown of progress, its mission to spread that product’s benefits around the globe, the Van Kannel Revolving Door Company as this sedulous scribe presents it stands in the vanguard—or at the doorway—of civilization. If you do not adopt the revolving door, Blanchard warns, “you place your health and your life, or the health and life of your customers at the mercy of the elements and in the hands of chance” (AWVK, 93). Van Kannel has answered the desire of the ages for an airtight domain of human liberty—“Always Closed”—where Chance and Nature cannot penetrate. A cartoon that opens and closes the volume (fig. 1) links the revolving door with the revolution of the earth itself, both of them turning us from old worlds to new, from determination by material forces to mastery over them, from beings “half-akin to brute” to wholly free makers and products of culture.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.

And yet darker energies than these have also gathered on Van Kannel’s doorstep. Summing up the way Van Kannel’s creation functions as an “environmental filter” by “admitt[ing] persons but not the wind,” Reyner Banham writes that the revolving door “strangle[s] violent up-currents at birth.”<sup>15</sup> The invention put an end to the phenomenon known as “stack effect,” to which tall buildings having banks of elevators placed in a certain relation to the entrances were especially prone: rising elevators sucked conventional exterior doors inward, making them difficult to open from outside, and descending elevators blew them out—the building seeming to respire like a slumbering giant. But it is the recourse to violent metaphors like Banham’s that concerns me here, a habit that has perhaps been encouraged, by the historic portentousness of thresholds: it is through a doorway that we see the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, over a gate that we read “Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate”—or for that matter, “Arbeit macht Frei.” Also contributing to this custom may be what Rem Koolhaas calls the “humanistic assumption” in Western architecture that there is a

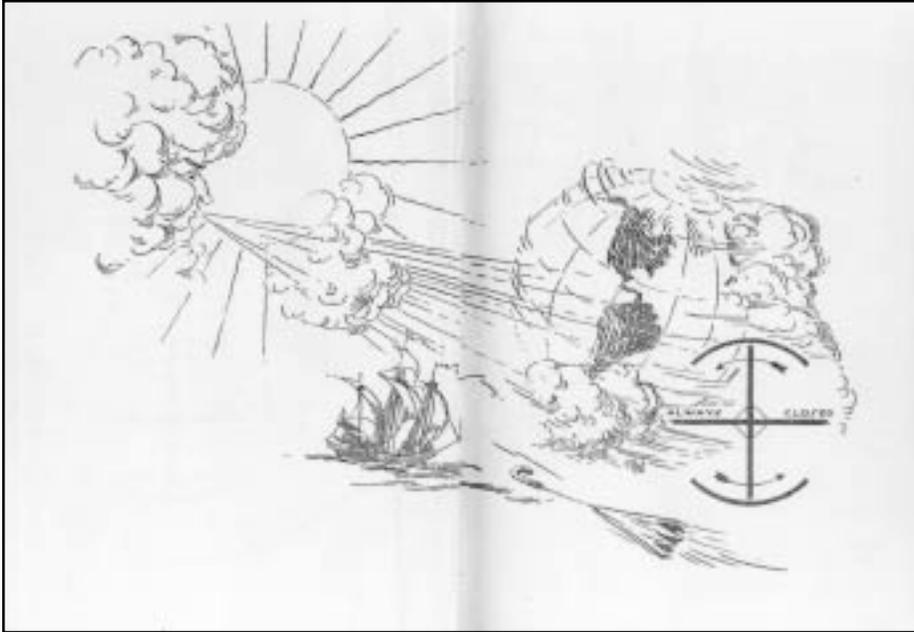


Fig. 1. Front and back cartoon from Robert Blanchard, *Around the World with Van Kannel* (2nd ed., 1930): “Always Closed”: the Van Kannel door and the (r)evolution of culture.

“moral relationship” between the exterior and the interior of a building and that “the ‘honest’ façade speaks about the activities it conceals.”<sup>16</sup> Such an assumption makes the threshold a site for the practice of candor or cunning, plain-dealing or treachery and deceit; and it underwrites the tendency of Van Kannel advertising to envision the entrance to every public building as the stage for a morality play depicting the clash of Reason and Nature.

But there seem to be reasons beyond the traditional, more specific to Van Kannel’s invention, for thinking of the revolving door as a strangely dangerous thing, a blend of beauty and menace that can take us places we may not want to go. In the recent film *The Truman Show*, the title character begins the painful process of unraveling his illusory world when, instead of entering his office building one morning, he spins the revolving door 360 degrees around and catches the actors and stagehands of his televised existence off-guard. However comforting it may be to contemplate the benefits conferred on humankind by Van Kannel’s sealing off of the threshold, there can be something unsettling and disorienting about the experience of actually using the door—as if the new invulnerability of the building has been purchased at the cost of a new vulnerability for individuals. In Part VII of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, the poet conducts his readers through a subway station and counsels them to “[a]void the glass doors gyring at your right, / Where boxed alone a second, eyes take fright / —Quite unprepared rush naked back to light. . . .”<sup>17</sup> What is Crane afraid of? Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972) provides a memorable answer in the sequence, late in the film, in which one of Michael Corleone’s henchmen, reversing that Enlightenment spin which Van Kannel liked to place on his invention, stages the whacking of a competing



Fig. 2. Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972): caught in the infernal machine.



Fig. 3. *The Godfather*: glass coffin.

566 mob boss in the revolving door (figs. 2, 3). The new Don's hired gun follows his mark toward the revolving door and flips the lock atop the door's panels, shutting off Van Kannel's "stream of persons" and turning the fluidly spinning wheel into a glass cage—ultimately into a transparent coffin. The sequence gives us an exaggerated, gothic explanation for Crane's dread of being "boxed alone," however briefly, in this device that makes *visible* our vulnerability to assault.

If we consult the useful annotations in the *American Law Reports (ALR)* by Gregory G. Sarno and F. G. Madara on "Liability for Injuries in Connection with Revolving Door on Nonresidential Premises" and "Liability for Injury by Revolving Door," we must come away from the experience powerfully impressed by the wealth and variety of mishaps capable of occurring in and around this type of door.<sup>18</sup> Among the "contributing factors" to revolving door accidents which Sarno enumerates, one finds "location of door or nearby doormat or step," "use of opaque panels," "size of revolving door's compartments," "worn or defective friction strips or retarding devices," "collapsing of revolving door's wings," "improper use of directional signs or failure to provide warnings," "slippery or sticky substances on the floor in or near revolving door," and "other and unspecified causes" ("ALICRD," 138). The historical evolution of isolated incidents into a whole little class of legal proceedings can be charted by comparing the index to the 1st and 2nd *Decennial Digests of American Legal Cases* (covering 1685–1916), which contain only a subheading, "Door, revolving," and list two negligence cases, with the index to the 3rd and 4th *Decennial Digests* (1917–1936), in which "Revolving Door" has earned an entry of its own, under which to organize its ever-proliferating examples.

The decisions reached by American courts during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth tended to reinforce the idea inscribed in the revolving door's allotment of space, namely that while inside the door you are on your own. In *Washington Market Co. v. Clagett*, a 1901 case in which "the plaintiff [had] slipped on a pile of fish immediately after emerging from a covered revolving door leading into a market," the court held that while the proprietor was obliged "to keep entrances [to his market] in a reasonably safe condition," he was by no means "an insurer of the safety of the persons who come there" ("ALIRD," 1346). In the 1905 matter of *Harris v. Cowles*, the complaint charged the revolving door with being "particularly enticing to children of tender years," adding that the hotel in question had "fail[ed] to provide any apparatus to prevent the limbs or body of a person from being caught between the door's jambs and partition" ("ALICRD," 146). The ruling in favor of the defendant set a precedent by rejecting the idea that the revolving door could be classed with those special objects set aside as "attractive nuisances," for which property owners must assume responsibility even where (underage) trespassers are concerned. Traffic flow took precedence over other considerations: it was, the court said, "manifestly impracticable" to take the precaution of keeping the door locked, since "the purpose of this circular door . . . requires that it shall be subject to the uses of ordinary passage at any moment" (qtd. in "ALIRD," 1350). The 1937 case of *Provo v. Toledo Trust* reaffirmed this ruling: young Albert Provo had, to his cost, evidently

drawn “the inference that the revolving door was to him a new toy with which to play.” But the judge emphatically denied that the revolving door could be considered an “inherently dangerous instrumentality,” finding that “if not defective, the possibility of danger inures in the manner of its use.”<sup>19</sup>

In these cases, the revolving door was playing its part in the evolution of tort law. The accidents taking place in or around it became occasions for testing the boundaries of those fuzzy categories of the “inherently dangerous instrumentality” and the “attractive nuisance,” which contained the only recognized exceptions to the blanket indemnity then enjoyed by manufacturers and to the somewhat less spacious but still significant freedom from responsibility possessed by the proprietors of hotels, stores, and the like. The notion of an “inherently dangerous” product had originated in a New York case in 1852; afterward, as *Prosser on Torts* informs us, “for more than half a century . . . there was much pointless dispute . . . as to how such products as soap, chewing tobacco, or the container of a beverage were to be classified.”<sup>20</sup> Prosser characterizes nineteenth-century courts as animated by a general “social viewpoint” that made them reluctant to impose “too heavy a burden upon manufacturers and sellers” by holding “them responsible to hundreds of persons at a distance whose identity they could not even know . . . It was better to let the consumer suffer.”<sup>21</sup> Since direct agreement—or “privity”—had not taken place between makers and users, no contract was deemed to exist between them.

Benjamin Cardozo’s decision in *MacPherson v. Buick Motor Co.* in 1916 virtually created product liability law *ex nihilo*, by identifying a defective product as an inherently dangerous one. In two cases in the years that sandwich that decision, the Van Kannel Revolving Door Company came as close as it ever would to the territory Cardozo was opening up. Both were proceedings in which, as in most cases featuring revolving doors, the complaints focused on “the rubber and felt strips . . . attached from the top of each wing to the bottom along the outer edge” (“ALIRD,” 1350). In *Buzzell v. R.H. White Co.* of 1915, the department store in question was exonerated of negligence when it stipulated that, even though the strips were indeed worn down to such a degree that they did nothing to restrict speed of revolution, they were never intended to have such a function, but were simply seals to prevent heat loss. In his patent application, in fact, Van Kannel never raises the issue of velocity at all: for him, the strips “bearing against the inner faces of [the] segmental side portions of the structure,” derive their rationale entirely from their function as guards against air leakage and, somewhat incidentally, caught fingers.<sup>22</sup> In *Hochschild v. Cecil*, a 1917 case about a sixty-eight year old woman who had “received a sudden blow from behind while proceeding cautiously through [a] store’s revolving door,” “a consulting engineer testified that the ‘Van Kannel’ door used by the store was what might be termed a ‘pioneer,’ but now ‘obsolete,’ type of revolving door which had been replaced by modern [versions] with stationary ceilings and more easily controlled momentum” (“ALICRD,” 159–60). With the concept of manufacturer’s liability in its infancy, however, the question of whether a revolving door can be considered defective, and hence an “inherently dangerous instrumentality,” because it lacks any form of “spin control” remained a dead

568 letter. Beefed-up strips were quietly introduced; a feature of later catalogues was the “Governing Device,” which, it was asserted, “does away with the *only* objection to the use of revolving doors, i.e. spinning of the wings when a person goes through the vestibule in a great hurry” (“GENIN,” 28; emphasis in original). These alterations were made not only to manage turn speed but to prevent backward, or clockwise, movement—a phenomenon that was to have painful results in more than a few instances, even though Van Kannel had said in his patent application that his revolving door would “preferably [be] provided at the top or bottom, or both, with a retaining pawl or equivalent device, so that said door can move in but one direction.”<sup>23</sup> In *Finch v. Horn and Hardart Baking Co.*, a 1928 Pennsylvania case that bore out the principle of *respondeat superior*, the automat was held liable for the action of an “employee who was coming out of the restaurant’s revolving door just as [the] plaintiff was entering, [and who] suddenly retraced his steps and went back into the room the way he had come, causing the door to revolve backwards and to knock the plaintiff onto the restaurant’s floor” (“ALICRD,” 148–99). No liability was attached to the manufacturer of a door capable of being misused in this way.

It would be misleading to suggest that people have shown a greater propensity to harm themselves, or others, in revolving doors than they have done in or with any number of other objects. But the injuries sustained and the fear aroused by revolving doors has much to do with the fact that they place two or more people in a form of relationship not created by any other apparatus for the movement of bodies through space. In the revolving door, strangers who are visible to, yet partitioned off from each other are obliged to act not merely courteously but collaboratively, choreographing their movements by silent agreement so as to ease the passage of both to their opposite destinations. What ought to occur is a model in miniature of the well-functioning civil polity, a system of cooperative strangers and an equilibrium of individual interests: the enterer’s desire for ingress is presumed to counterbalance the exiter’s for egress, and the revolving door is supposed to effect “the simultaneous passage of one stream of persons *in* and another *out* with freedom and comfort” (“MEPA,” emphasis in original). Furthermore, the revolving door gives concrete shape to a vision of society in which the individual is, as Rachel Bowlby puts it, “the only significant social category.”<sup>24</sup> Larger social units, such as the family, do not figure in Van Kannel’s calculus: this was a man who, when he thought of the future, thought first of the 21st-century “boarding house,” an institution that exists to serve a population of unattached urban males.<sup>25</sup> In place of that absent *privity* between manufacturer and user, the revolving door substituted an unspoken pact among its isolated users to ensure the smooth operation of the mechanism and the safe passage of all parties. Anyone unlucky enough to step into the revolving door at the same instant that a homicidal maniac, a staggering drunk, or just a very incompetent *schlemiel*, was entering it from the other side was certainly to be pitied, but such a person would have no legal recourse against Van Kannel—even though dependency upon the other and inability to flee are built into the design.



▲ Fig. 4. Charlie Chaplin, *The Cure* (1917): the need for spin control.

Just as Cardozo was making legal history with his decision in *MacPherson v. Buick Motor Co.*, another visionary was developing his account of a world centered on the revolving door and operating on principles utterly different from those of Van Kannel's libertarian utopia. Working in his scriptless, experimental manner, Charlie Chaplin did not hit upon the notion of using a revolving door to provide the engine of mayhem for his 1917 short film "The Cure" until take #77. Once he had glimpsed the device's comic possibilities, however, Chaplin went about constructing his film according to the method characteristic of all his early comedies: "Every one of them," said an early reviewer, "is built *around* something."<sup>26</sup> "The Cure" makes this principle plain for all to see, since Chaplin, flying in the face of premises liability case law, has decided to install his inspirational prop smack in the middle of a spa courtyard, perilously close to the pool of medicinal waters. He has also opted for that "pioneer" model of the revolving door that is capable of spinning rapidly in either direction. It is only a matter of time before he starts inflicting all manner of injury upon the prodigiously bandaged appendage of Eric Campbell and discharging pursuers headlong into that pool (fig. 4). Every hilariously bruising relationship Chaplin creates in and around the revolving door is derived from the repressed unconscious of Theophilus Van Kannel. Ultimately, the circular movement of the Van Kannel door becomes more than just the motive force of Chaplin's slapstick: it becomes a figure for his comic genius, the signature or promise of an endless capacity for ludic invention.

570 Lawyers filing suit against the proprietors of premises on which revolving door accidents occurred frequently invoked the doctrine of *res ipsa loquitur*, considering those proprietors responsible for keeping all mechanisms on their properties in safe working order. *Promisel v. Hotels Statler Corporation* of 1934 went in favor of the plaintiff because the glass in one panel of the door had been temporarily replaced with a wooden board, which blocked a woman's view of the man who was on his way out as she prepared to step in: "the court declared that . . . the opaque board created a danger in the use of the revolving door which made it defective" ("ALICRD," 157). But proprietors were in the clear when no such defect was discernible and the door "was operated and controlled by an independent third party whose unusual method of operation . . . was the proximate cause" of the injury ("ALIRD," 1349–50).<sup>27</sup> Only in rare cases such as the 1938 affair of *Schubart v. Hotel Astor* did a court sustain a complaint against the proprietor of a premises that featured a revolving door in good working order. In this instance the court found that it would have been reasonable for the hotel to post attendants on the doors on the particular Saturday evening when an elderly woman was injured in them, because it was the evening after the big Army-Notre Dame football game, and a group of Army fans "in a gay, hilarious, and carousing mood" had taken "possession of [the] main lobby"—a fact that should have alerted hotel management "to the anticipation that the revolving door would not only be subjected to excessive use but also that it would be likely to receive rough usage and unseemly abuse" ("ALIRD," 1354). Poor Mrs. Schubart was the victim of "a couple of young fellows" who, in a carousing mood, entered one of the door's compartments all together and gave "a big or extra hard push" ("ALIRID," 1354). So much for that hopeful Van Kannel vision of sociality inscribed in the door's design.

### 3.

But even when no accidents occurred and no bodies were bruised, bent, or broken, there still remained a sense in which the revolving door might be thought an instrument of a certain kind of violence. This door which, Van Kannel said, "never needs closing, [yet] cannot be left open" was also "a mechanical paradox," and by the time Blanchard wrote his treatise, the company motto had been amended to "Always *Open*, Always *Closed*" (AWVK, 94; emphasis added). For while it may be true that the revolving door outdoes all other entrance mechanisms in safeguarding the boundary between inside and out, there is another point of view from which it opens up that boundary, giving movement across it a fluidity no other door can match. "Persons on first hearing of the new door," Van Kannel wrote, "often fall into the error of underrating its capacity for passage, supposing it will not permit as many persons to pass in and out in a given time as the old style storm doors" ("MEPA"). But the revolving door "keeps the in-going and out-going streams of passengers separated, thus allowing one solid stream to pass in and another out without collisions" ("MEPA"). Notwithstanding the inspired abuse to which geniuses like Coppola or Chaplin have submitted it, the device in its normal working groove converts human bodies into these "solid streams"



▲  
Fig. 5. King Vidor, *The Crowd* (1928): compulsory-heterosexuality machine.

of traffic, then condenses those streams back into isolated particles, each of which is encased, as if on display, behind plate glass for the instant or two it takes the door to spin. Though in one way more fluid, passage into and out of the building is also broken by this tiny hiatus, which the user spends in a vacuum-like “*apart-ment*.” The fact that ambient noise is muffled during this brief delay tends to heighten the impact of entrance into and exit from the door. The moment of exit now comes as a release or, as in Crane’s *The Bridge*, a rebirth, after the user has been “boxed alone.”

The revolving door’s appearance of being a machine for breaking down and reconstituting individuals “cut to size” is strongly suggested by King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928), a film that bemoans the dehumanizing effects of the modern city but also replicates them in the assembly-line manner in which it furnishes its hero and heroine. The office workers John and Mary are elevated to the status of protagonists only by virtue of their utter typicality: give me any two of this teeming mass, Vidor seems to say, and I will build my story around them. The couple is first brought together for a blind date that commences at the close of business hours. The sequence begins when John joins a line of men awaiting their dates of the evening on the sidewalk across from the Van Kannel doors of the building where Mary works. Spinning and releasing individual women with the apparent randomness of a lottery canister, the revolving door here marks the boundary between the new paper-pushing, service-economy workday and a leisure-time, heterosexual economy whose processes hark back to old-fashioned factory production. Each revolution of the office building’s door pumps out one unit of female product, straight onto the arm of a waiting escort (fig. 5). This curbside dispen-

572 sary of womankind manufactures straight couples with near-perfect efficiency, producing but few “surplus goods.” (Vidor briefly disrupts the workings of this compulsory-heterosexuality machine by isolating a couple of women who, “dateless,” emerge from the revolving door, pay no attention to the men waiting on the curb, and go off together. Only by producing a Mary out of the revolving door, to go with his John, can Vidor proceed to the task of producing his own narrative, which now begins to spin as briskly, from date to marriage to consequences, as a Van Kannel “pioneer” when pushed by a hurried user. Like the door—like the turning film reel on which Vidor spins his story—the narrative of *The Crowd* describes a circular motion, bringing its couple back around again to their starting point. Chastened by the many sufferings he endures throughout the film, John winds up happy to accept the job of street clown which he and Mary had once laughingly, and literally, looked down upon, from the upper deck of the bus that bore them away on their first date. In his end is his beginning.

Films like *The Crowd* secured the revolving door’s identification with the new American world of skyscrapers, commerce, and clerks. In Europe, where “prior to World War II, the commercial high-rise was unknown,” Van Kannel’s creation found its natural habitat not in the American-style “cathedral of commerce”—the label given to Woolworth’s Gothic tower of 1913—but in the very different precincts of the Grand Hotel.<sup>28</sup> In F. W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (*Der Letzte Mann*, 1924) the circular door is, if geometry will permit the phrase, squarely at the center of the tale, first pathetic, then comic, of an aging doorman who finds himself abruptly demoted to washroom attendant and then, as if in recompense, suddenly made a millionaire to be waited upon by every employee of the institution that once degraded him.

Two settings divide Murnau’s movie between them: the hotel where the doorman labors and the working-class neighborhood in which he lives. Conductor of human traffic into and out of the hotel, he is also the film’s humble Hermes, the only character who can take us from the one environment to the other, traversing the whole social system whose classes are otherwise so morally invisible to each other. The uniqueness of his Dickensian capacity to connect the estranged segments of society is signaled by the fact that he wears his doorman’s uniform not only on the job, where it is a badge of service, but all the way home as well, where it is magically transformed into a mantle of authority: the doorman strolls his neighborhood like a benevolent ruler, waving benignly, comforting hurt children, deferred to by everyone. The *Drehtür* (revolving door) he presides over at work becomes the emblem of this man who “makes the rounds” of a fragmented society.

Murnau’s revolving door is, like Vidor’s, part dehumanizing machine, part figure for the medium in which he works, part wheel of fortune. On the day the hotel decides to replace him with a younger man, the old employee walks to work as usual, enters the Van Kannel door, and finds himself looking into the distorted mirror of his fate (figs. 6–9). The impersonal system that dispenses with his services has unceremoniously ousted him in favor of a new and improved cog, that erect and impassive figure whom Murnau places in motion on the opposite side of the revolving door exactly as the older one enters it. In this brilliant piece of staging, the old doorman’s professional



Fig. 6. F.W. Murnau, *Der Letzte Mann* [*The Last Laugh*] (1924): arriving for work.



Fig. 7. *The Last Laugh*: inside the door.



Fig. 8. *The Last Laugh*: what the doorman saw.



Fig. 9. *The Last Laugh*: trying to rewind the reel of fate.

talisman turns against him, and, pathetically, his first impulse is to try to turn it back: having passed into the hotel interior as his replacement has headed out to the curb, he now makes a feeble push backward against the momentum of the door, as if he could undo his fate the same way one might wind back a reel of film. His young usurper does not figure at all in the narrative: he is just the individual who happened to get the job, and he just happens to pass by at that moment; but Murnau's dazzling sequence suggests that Van Kannel's social ideal of a silent partnership of strangers has been exchanged for the harsh vision of society as a zero-sum game, all individual relationships corrupted into various forms of unequal competition, all success gained at another's expense.

In Murnau, what is initially felt as the mere coincidence of two men's movements turns into the violence done by an alienated social order to its faceless functionaries. In the deliriously gratifying conclusion of *The Last Laugh*, the dehumanizing mechanism spins the other way: through the revolving door the former wage slave now emerges as a new and pampered hotel guest. In a similar spirit, a memorable passage in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953) uses the Van Kannel door to strike a blow for all downtrodden and dependent workers, making it the tool of the title character's anarchic retribution against his thoughtlessly cruel, cruelly thoughtless superior, Professor Welch, for whom temporary lecturers are as interchangeable as hotel doormen. The passage begins as Jim Dixon leaves his oppressor at the entrance to the college library:

Dixon turned away, only to start violently and look back as a loud thundering noise broke out behind him. Welch, his hair flapping, was straining like a packed-down rugby forward to push the revolving door in the wrong direction. Dixon stood and watched, allowing his mandrill face full play. After a time Welch, somehow divining his error, began pulling instead at the now-jammed door, changing his semblance to that of anchor in a losing tug-o'-war team. With a sudden bursting click the door yielded and Welch overbalanced backwards, hitting his head on the panel behind him. Dixon went away, beginning to whistle his Welch tune in a solemn, almost liturgical tempo. He felt that it was things like this that kept him going.<sup>29</sup>

In other instances of the Grand Hotel paradigm, the Van Kannel door may stake no special claim to identification as a weapon of class struggle, but functions as a more or less benign figure for the changeful and aleatory nature of life. This broadly "democratic" vision, with its pacifying message that all are subject to the turns of fortune's wheel, was perhaps an especially palatable one for American audiences of the early Depression era, and it figures most prominently in Edmund Goulding's *Grand Hotel* (1932), an MGM production that puts this distinctly American spin on the Continental idea of the revolving door. The film, which is set in 1920s Berlin, gains access to this generalized viewpoint on life by focusing not on a single member of the subordinate class but on an ensemble of characters, most of them guests, who pass through the hotel and move into and out of various forms of relationship with each other. In its extended final sequence, set in the hotel lobby, *Grand Hotel* makes Van Kannel's invention the definitively human doorway, the mortal portal, expressing with every revolution the mutability of earthly existence.

576 Koolhaas clearly has Goulding's work in mind when he observes:

In the thirties—when the second Waldorf is being built—the “Hotel” becomes Hollywood's favorite subject. In a sense, it relieves the scriptwriter of the obligation of inventing a plot. A Hotel is a plot—a cybernetic universe with its own laws generating random but fortuitous collisions between human beings who would never have met elsewhere. It offers a fertile cross section through the population, a richly textured interface between social castes, a field for the comedy of clashing manners and a neutral background of routine operations to give every incident dramatic relief. With the Waldorf, the Hotel itself becomes such a movie, featuring the guests as stars and the personnel as a discreet coat-tailed chorus of extras. . . . The movie begins at the revolving door [though it much more strikingly ends with it]—symbol of the unlimited surprises of coincidence . . .<sup>30</sup>

In his promotional booklet for the Van Kannel company, Robert Blanchard supplies one characterization of the inventor and his revolutionary door that comes close to anticipating the chief effects of Goulding's film.

Here, in the Riviera Palace Hotel, the elite of the world pass through Van Kannel doors. How many thousands have come through this door at the beginning of a new day, buoyed up with the thought that today was the day of success. How many have plodded wearily back in the late hours of the night, after the casino had closed, sadder, but seldom wiser. Yet some there are who swing through with light step. Winners for the day! And wise old Van Kannel admits them all, giving each, winner and loser alike, the faultless service for which [his door] is constructed. (AWVK, 15)

“Wise old Van Kannel” is rather darkly impersonated in *Grand Hotel* by the character of Doctor Ottersschlag (Lewis Stone), the *genius loci* of the circular lobby that is the primary space in this circular film. A resident of the hotel, he keeps his station through all the arrivals and departures charted in the movie, arrivals and departures both literal and metaphoric (the film records one death, one birth). He is given, for good measure, a face half blackened by wartime injury, so as to identify him all the more plainly as Janus, the two-faced god of doorways. His closing line in the movie repeats his opening one—“people come, people go; nothing ever happens”—as the revolving door, spinning almost continuously throughout the closing sequence, becomes his Ixion's wheel. Doctor Ottersschlag is Hollywood's Continental philosopher, its minor Nietzsche for the inter-war years: deadened and detached before the human comedy, he stands in stark contrast to the vigorous, newly-married American couple that arrives and pushes its way through the revolving door just after the many corrupt, disabled, or deluded Europeans have passed out of it (figs. 10, 11).

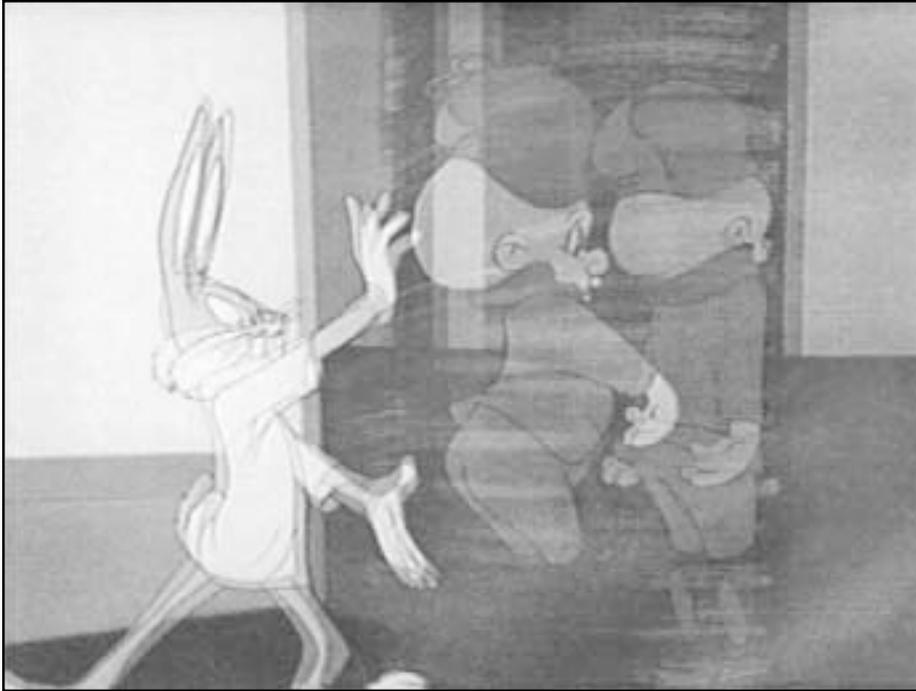
In the fifty-year span I have traced here, Theophilus Van Kannel's most famous invention established itself not only as a definitive feature of urban experience but also as a particularly rich and flexible trope. All sorts of repetitive or alternating processes could be represented by means of it. On it could be focused all manner of social hopes and fears; in the glass panels of its quiet chambers subjectivity might glimpse itself anew. I propose to halt on the threshold of subsequent developments, which would



Fig. 10. Edmund Goulding (director), *Grand Hotel* (1932): Janus at his post.



Fig. 11. *Grand Hotel*: the young Americans arrive.



▲  
Fig. 12. *Rabbit of Seville* (1950, Warner Bros.).

include the proliferation of the revolving door metaphor throughout contemporary life, a development especially notable in the discourses of government and public policy. Today an internet search of the phrase “revolving door” will turn up a dreary catalogue of journalistic and other reports on various suspect practices (as in the revolving door between the domains of politics and corporate lobbying) or distressingly recurring phenomena (as in the revolving door of jails, drug-treatment centers, and the like). Since the conclusion of the Second World War, the idea of being caught or trapped in the revolving door has come to express the conviction of Red-scared, bureaucratized, conspiracy-theoried publics that the modernist transparency of the revolving door is a lie, that the forces propelling our movements and shaping our world operate elsewhere, on some inaccessible, invisible plane. The sense of fear and vulnerability that has long circulated around the revolving door received its most notorious updating in the George Bush (senior) campaign’s race-baiting ad of 1988 attacking Michael Dukakis’s prison furlough program: that “stream of persons” Van Kannel had imagined was now turned into a flood of dark-skinned felons making their way out of lock-up and into our (white suburban) nightmares.

But I do not wish to end with this cynical soft-money spot, or with Doctor Otterschlag at his private Gate of Hell, uttering those bitter words akin to Dante’s “Abandon every hope, all who enter here.” It takes some effort of will to think ourselves outside the postmodern cage, back to an era when the revolving door could inspire feelings, not of despair or of jadedness, but of wonder and joy. Before reentering as I

must the door of our own day, I want to pause in celebration of the perfect use made of Van Kannel's device in one last artistic medium, half a century ago. This was a form that, Chaplinesque, appeared capable, for a time, of endless recyclings without loss of vigor, of eternal returns to an enchanting Pandemonium whose victim just kept coming back for more (fig. 12). The door spins; Elmer Fudd stumbles in again; and the final word of "Rabbit of Seville" (1950) is Bugs the barber's "Next!"

## Notes

1. See Gretl Hoffmann, *Doors: Excellence in International Design* (London: George Godwin; New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), and Val Clery, *Doors* (New York: Viking, 1978). The revolving door is not, or is barely, mentioned in: Tim Benton and Charlotte Benton, with Dennis Sharp, eds., *Architecture and Design, 1890–1939: An International Anthology of Original Articles* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1975); Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Carl W. Condit, *The Rise of the Skyscraper* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture, 1851–1945* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style* (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1995); Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condit, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865–1913* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Hrant Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution and Economics* (London: Newman Books, 1954); Bill Riseboro, *Modern Architecture and Design: An Alternative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969); Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1990); Alistair Service, *Edwardian Architecture: A Handbook to Building Design in Britain, 1890–1914* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977); Joseph Siry, *Carson Pirie Scott: Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Department Store* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); John Summerson, *The Turn of the Century: Architecture in Britain around 1900* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976); Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dalco, *Modern Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); Robert W. Twyman, *History of Marshall Field and Co., 1852–1906* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969). A Heckscher Museum exhibit entitled *Windows and Doors* (Huntington, New York, 30 Jan–19 March, 1972) featured no images of revolving doors. Albert Haberer's *Doors and Gates* (London: Iliffe Books, 1952; 6th ed. 1964) contains only three images of revolving doors and no design drawings for them, though it contains design drawings for almost every other imaginable type of door.

2. Elaine Scarry, "The Railway Emergency Brake: The Use of Analogy in Legal and Political Argument" (unpublished typescript), 2.

3. Richard Sennett, "Plate Glass," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 6.4 (Winter 1987): 15. I have altered Sennett's phrase from "inherent ambiguity" here.

4. Sennett, "Plate Glass": 15.

5. A copy of Van Kannel's original patent and of the materials pertaining to the award of the John Scott medal were kindly provided to me by the curatorial department of the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

6. This quotation and other information on the early history of the revolving door is derived from Harvey E. Van Kannel and Joanne Fox Marshall's unpublished, copyrighted edition of *T. Van Kannel, The Inventor: His Autobiography and Journal, 2 vols.* (Oak Ridge, Tenn., 1988), in the Library of Congress. The long quotation is in the appendix to volume 2.

7. By 1900, the Van Kannel Revolving Door Company, headquartered in the Fuller Building at 23rd Street and Broadway in New York, was operating internationally, with branch offices in Paris and Berlin, and holding patents in many European countries. The spread of the Van Kannel door in Europe was somewhat delayed, however, by various restrictions there on building heights: the London Building Act of 1894, for instance, set a limit of 30 meters, and without very tall structures (and banks of elevators) the desirability of the Van Kannel door could not so readily be perceived. See Lee Polisano, "Complexity and Contrast: American and European High-Rise Buildings," *Reaching for the Skies: Architectural Design Profile* 116 (1995): 30–35.

8. For a revisionist perspective on architectural history, one that emphasizes the continuities rather than the disjunction between Victorian and modernist methods, see James A. Schmiechen, "The Victorians, the Historians, and the Idea of Modernism," *American Historical Review* 93.2 (April 1988): 287–316.

9. "The Van Kannel Storm Door: 'Always Closed': A Mechanical Paradox," an unpaginated promotional leaflet included among the materials in the Franklin Institute's file pertaining to the 1889 award of the John Scott Legacy medal to Van Kannel. Henceforth abbreviated as "MEPA".

10. See Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 73–74.

11. Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (Boston: Little Brown, n.d.; first ed. 1929), 159–60.

12. Van Kannel Revolving Door Company, "General Information: Revolving Doors: Always Closed" (n.d.), 36. Henceforth abbreviated as "GENIN".

13. Robert L. Blanchard, *Around the World with Van Kannel* (New York: Van Kannel Revolving Door Company, 2nd ed. 1930), 7. Henceforth cited in the text as AWVK.

14. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A. H. H.," in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 484.

15. Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, 74.

16. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 100.

17. Hart Crane, *The Bridge*, Part VII, in *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Webber (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 108–9.

18. Gregory G. Sarno, "Annotation: Liability for Injuries in Connection with Revolving Door on Nonresidential Premises," 93 *ALR* 3rd 132 (henceforth "ALICRD"); F. G. Madara, "Annotation: Liability for Injury by Revolving Door," 169 *ALR* 1346 (henceforth "ALIRD").

19. *Provo v. Toledo Trust Co.* (1937), 60 Ohio App. 82; 19 NE 2nd 520.

20. William Lloyd Prosser and W. Page Keeton, *Prosser and Keeton on Torts*, 5th ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1984), 682.

21. Prosser, 682.

22. United States Patent Office, Theophilus Van Kannel of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, "Storm-Door Structure," Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 387,571, 7 August, 1888, 2.

23. United States Patent Office, "Storm-Door Structure," 7 August, 1888, 1.

24. Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 68.

25. Van Kannel's vision of the future is entitled "In 100 Years from Now, and the Year A.D. 2001" and included in Harvey E. Van Kannel and Joanne Fox Marshall, eds., *T. Van Kannel, The Inventor: His Autobiography and Journal*, Vol. 1, A2–A19. Any parent or childcare provider can probably describe at length the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of using the revolving door when in the company of small children. Do you put them in your compartment, and risk tripping over them, because in this position you can better protect them against sudden lurches caused by other users? Or do you let them go it alone—and if so, in front of you or behind you?—subjecting them to the whims of every errant door-shover, or worse, every lurking child-snatcher, who might come along? If you let them face these dangers on their own, it is somehow worse that you can see them but not reach them, so that you might see the waiting pedophile who abducts them as they emerge and then prevents your pursuit by jamming the door with some metal rod or piece of wood.

26. Quoted in David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 169; emphasis in original.

27. Some relevant cases include: *Nersiff v. Worcester County Institute for Savings*, 1928 (“ALIRD,” 1351); *Eyerly v. Baker*, 1935 (“ALIRD,” 1352); *Sterns v. Highland Hotel Co.*, 1940 (“ALIRD,” 1356); *Dunn v. First National Bank*, 1935 (“ALIRD,” 1356).

28. Polisano, “Complexity and Contrast,” 30. Its absence, Polisano argues, may be traced to a fundamental difference between European and American economic strategies: European nations opted to reduce domestic competition by forming large syndicates or cartels that would “co-ordinate investment, share capital and benefit from government support;” in the U.S., where a strong distrust of government prerogatives prevailed, mergers of private companies gave rise to numerous very large ones controlling sizeable pools of capital and requiring vast areas of office space in the commercial centers. Kenneth Turney Gibbs links the emergence of the skyscraper more specifically to the “meteoric rise of life insurance in the business world” after the Civil War. The Equitable Life Assurance Co. was “the first corporation bold enough to undertake a great office building in connection with its own necessary place of business:” its headquarters, constructed in 1868–1870, was also the first to have a passenger elevator. See Gibbs, *Business Architectural Imagery in America, 1870–1930* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 25.

29. Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (orig. 1953; New York: Viking, 1958), 179.

30. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 148–50.