### I Can't Help It; I've Got a Military-Industrial Complex

By Karen Green

Tuesday June 8, 2010 06:00:00 am

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Do you want to know what's so great about writing for ComiXology—besides the opportunity to pontificate monthly in this august forum (and besides my patient and understanding bosses, Peter and David)? Meeting and learning from my fellow columnists, that's what so great. A year ago March, for example, Kristy Valenti gave me a personal tour of the Fantagraphics mothership while I was in Seattle for a conference. And at New York Comic-Con 2009, I finally met the inimitable Tucker Stone (not to mention the lovely and talented Nina), who immediately quelled my nervous apprehension (I was terrified of him on the page) and became a trusted friend and source. Tucker takes all my plaintive and ignorant superhero questions seriously (more on those in a future column), and answers them thoughtfully and comprehensively. So, when I ran into him at MoCCA Fest 2009, and he said, "You've got to see this!" I followed him unquestioningly.
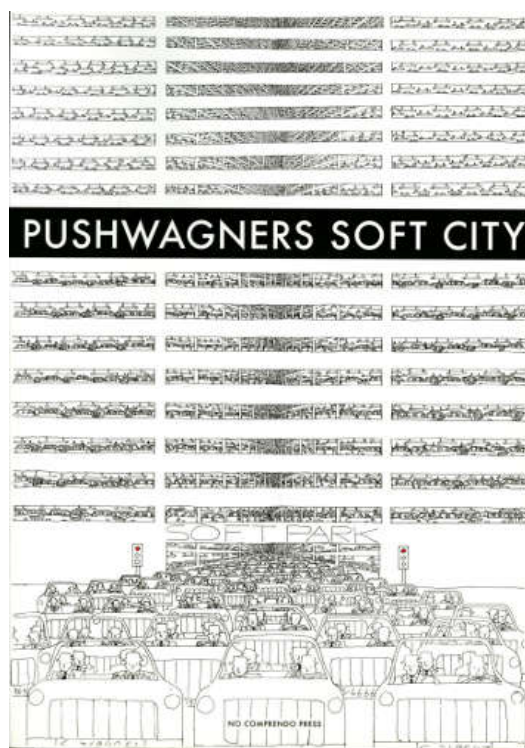
"This" was *Pushwagners Soft City*, at the Scandinavian tables along the north wall of the Armory and, despite the crowds around *Asterios Polyp*, this was the buzz book of the show, for me. I bought a copy for myself after looking at, oh, about two pages.

A graphic novel with perhaps the oddest backstory ever, *Pushwagners Soft City* was begun

in 1969 by Norwegian artist Terje Brofos ("Pushwagner," his nom d'art, is formed from a word for a supermarket shopping cart, which already hints at his fascination with consumerism). On a trip to London in the mid-1970s, the suitcase with his completed manuscript was lost, and stayed lost for over twenty years. The story that I heard at MoCCA Fest was that the loss of his masterpiece had driven Pushwagner to despair and even homelessness (despite a series of exhibitionsthroughout the 1980s and 1990s), and that he only recovered the manuscript when he saw portions published in 2002 after its rediscovery. Sadly, I've yet to find any written support for that particular part of the narrative, attractive though it may be.

Soft City begins with the beginning of a day: sunrise over a massive apartment block, chaotic nature intruding into manufactured order. Baby Bingo rises with the sun—new day, new life—peeks in on his sleeping parents, then surveys his countless neighbors ("My friends") in the endless rows of identical windows outside his room. The morning paper, Soft Times, slips through the front door slot and introduces the first of the day's continuous barrage of random, all-caps words.


His parents' alarm clock sounds ("The machine is calling," reads the caption for the image of the Soft Electric clock), and they rise from their slumber, taking their morning Soft Pills (marked "Life"), eating their Soft breakfast, and preparing for the day. The father leaves the apartment to join a limitless corridor of identical men, dressed identically—I was reminded of Camazotz, the planet subjugated by IT in *A Wrinkle in Time*—and the mother and baby wave at him out their window, framed by limitless rows of identical women and babies. Off go the drones in four-person car-pools, all in the same direction, with only the occasional outlier thinking of something individual or personal, such as a fishing trip or a tropical island idyll.

They are going to Soft City, where they are the company, and the company is they. Stop performing for the corporation, and you might as well not exist. In fact, you might not exist at all. The executives take their seats in a sea of desks that call to mind the office in King Vidor's 1928 silent masterpiece, "The Crowd," another depiction of a huge, impersonal city, with massive, numbing architecture.
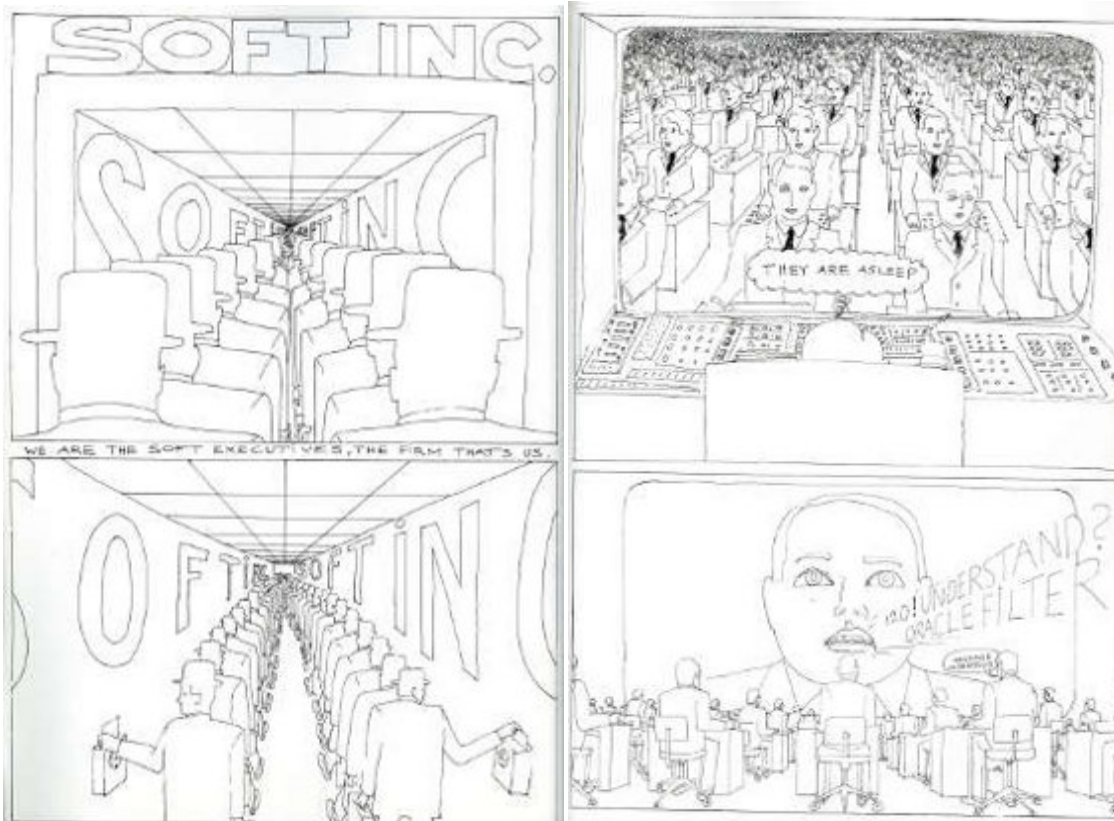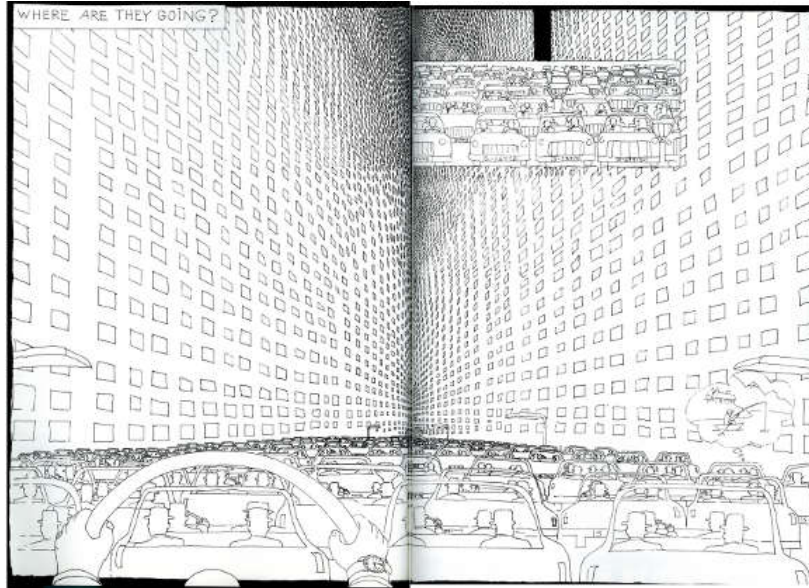
While the executives work at their desks, dominated by a looming screen with images that reinforce their efforts via even more random verbiage, their boss arrives in his comfy office and looks out over his hypnotized workforce. His own screen lets him vary the sight of his worker army with scenes of his family on a seaside vacation and flashing images of the military materiel that is the real business of Soft Inc. Battleships, tanks, neurotoxins…Soft Inc churns out these agents of death to an oblivious world, while its workers remain mesmerized by images of positivity and their wives and children dive happily into the consumer culture of the Soft Markets (decorated with hanging signs marked "Soft Consume"). The end of the book is the beginning in reverse, as the executives clock out, drive home, eat dinner, read the evening paper—too desensitized at this point even to register the image of a starving African mother and child—watch a little Soft TV ("Heil Hilton!" says the Soft Inc boss to a line of multi-star generals), take their evening Soft Pill (marked "Sleep"), and zone out as the moon rises over the faceless apartment blocks…

Any rebel is crushed, like the boy who bounces his ball out of rhythm on Camazotz, or Winston Smith inNineteen Eighty-Four; those with questions—like the tiny face in a tiny window, wondering "Where is the mind when the body is here?"—wisely keep their thoughts to themselves.
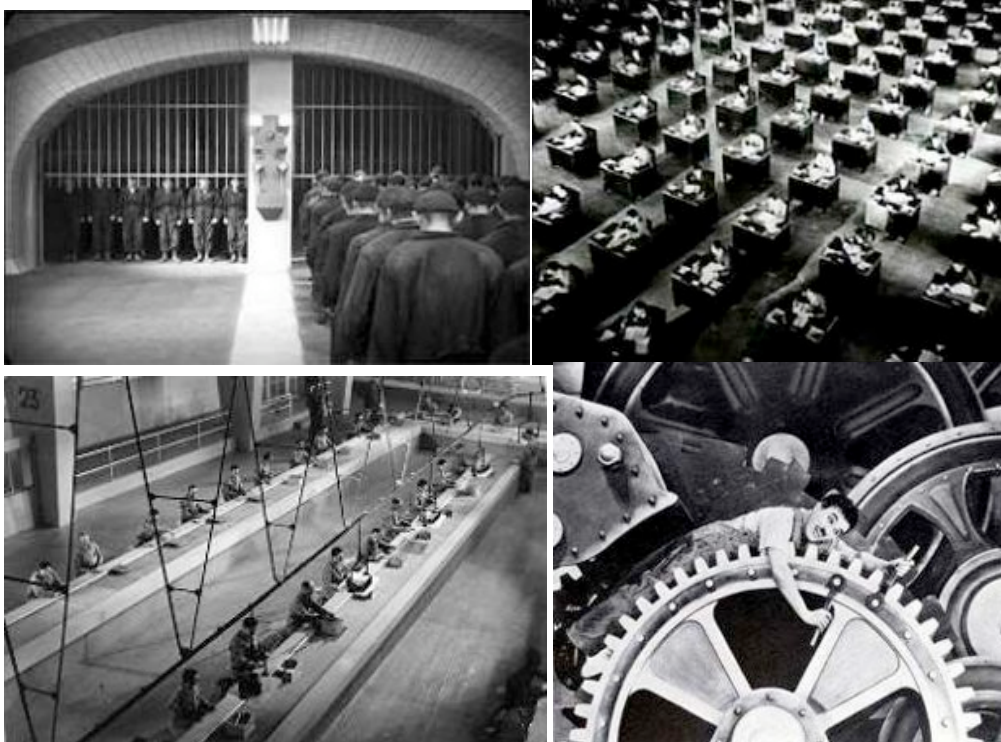
One can scarcely dip into this book without recognizing the proud lineage of films and novels it can boast, both early and contemporary. The arrival of the Machine Age spurred a host of films warning of the soul-deadening effect of both mechanization and corporations, from Fritz Lang's 1927 "Metropolis" to the afore-mentioned 1928 "The Crowd" to René Clair's 1931 "Á nous la liberté," which in turn influenced Charlie Chaplin's 1936 "Modern Times." Orwell's hand is easy to discern, too, as is Aldous Huxley's via Brave New World. Fast forward to President Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address, in which he warned Americans of the dangers of something he referred to as the military-industrial complex, the mutually-beneficial, symbiotic relationship between defense agencies and the arms industry. The rise

of mega-corporations in the late 1950s and early 1960s resulted in a new wave of alarmist novels and the films based on them, from John Frankenheimer's 1960s "The Manchurian Candidate" and "Seconds" to Alan Pakula's 1974 conspiracy thriller "The Parallax View," with its disturbing centerpiece, the Parallax Corporation's training film, a 5-minute barrage of iconic 20th-century images tied, ambiguously, to emotional cues.

Surely these were all part of Pushwagner's visual vocabulary as he worked on this project. This was not even his first foray into theoretical dystopia: some of the articles covering the release of*Pushwagners Soft City* describe it as a project he developed with novelist Axel Jensen, author of sci-fi novels that explore similar themes, despite no mention of Jensen on the published book.

Soft City is both a creation of its time and timeless: the almost hallucinatory story of a society tight in the grip of an omnipresent corporation, one that employs them, feeds them, informs them, entertains them–but which may or may not be what it seems. It conveys the political sentiments of its time in a simple, pure line, with only the m
ost meager spots of color (on the occasional traffic signal) and with almost no dialogue.

Sadly, the book has no American distributor as yet. When I returned to work from MoCCA Fest last year, I requested two copies for the library from our German vendor, armed with no more ordering information than an ISBN. I wanted one copy here on the shelves, and the second copy as emergency backup in our Offsite storage location in central New Jersey, in the event anything happened to copy number-one. Who knew whether it would be replaceable years hence?

It's large and unwieldy—over a foot tall—and impossible to purchase without incurring crippling overseas airmail charges, but I still hope that instructors here will find a way to fit it into their curricula. Whether the courses are on consumer culture, dystopia in film and literature, the rise and ramifica

tions of the military-industrial complex, or corporate conspiracy in popular culture, *Pushwagners Soft City*can hold its own.

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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