Watch a cinematic movie and critique the business ethics dilemmas

1. How was “the business world” portrayed…in a positive light, negative light, neutral, etc.?

The movie I chose was Thank You for Smoking starring Aaron Eckhart (Nick Naylor) as a quick witted tobacco lobbyist. Similar to examples brought out in the book Trust Us, We’re Experts! by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, this movie demonstrates how big business uses “experts” to influence the public. Overall, this comedy portrays big business as evil corporations trying to manipulate the public to buy their poisonous products. Nick Naylor works for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, a non-profit organization created and funded by big tobacco to counteract negative studies on tobacco products. He is part of what is known as the “Merchants of Death” or the “MOD Squad” of lobbying groups that include alcohol and firearms lobbyists. According to the movie “the sole purpose of their meetings, is to compete for the highest death toll as they compare strategies on how to dupe the American people.”

A great example of how the film portrays business negatively is when Nick Naylor describes what people think of tobacco executives. He states that, “most people have the image in their heads that tobacco execs are jet setting around the world on private planes, eating foie gras, as they count their money. Not me, I like to ride with the people. Know your clients. My people cram themselves in a tiny seat, pop a Xanex, and dream of a moment to stuff their face with fresh tobacco. If I can convince just one of these kids to take up smoking, I paid for my trip, roundtrip.” This movie shows the lengths that big business will go in order to promote their products, for better or worse of the health consequences.

Another great example of how the film portrays big business as wicked corporations doing whatever it takes to spin their message occurs at the beginning of the film. The film begins with
Nick Naylor appearing on Joan Lunden’s talk show *Joan* where he is paired alongside representatives from Mothers Against Teen Smoking, The Lung Association, Health & Human Services, and a 15 year old cancer boy. Everyone immediately boos Nick when his name is announced. He cleverly raises his hand and states “Joan, how on earth would big tobacco profit off of the loss of this young man. I would hate to think on such callous terms, but if anything, we would be losing a customer. It is not only our hope, but in our best interest to keep Robin (Cancer Boy) alive and smoking.” He then cunningly spins the message and the focus of the talk show by stating “the Ron Goodies (Health & Human Services Representative) of this world want the Robin Willagers (Cancer Boy) to die. You know why?….they want their budgets to go up. We are going to launch a $50 million campaign aimed at persuading kids not to smoke.” The talk show part ends with Nick Naylor shaking the hand of the dying cancer boy, while the boy is smiling graciously for the launch of the campaign and everyone cheers.

2. **What business ethics issues were portrayed?**

As you can probably imagine from the overall message of this film, there was a number of different business ethical issues portrayed. This includes issues surrounding promoting products that knowingly destroy a person’s health, work/life balance issues, bribery issues, and stretching the legal framework for business benefit. The movie suggests that all of these business ethical issues cannot be solved by quick “black and white” answers. There is always a gray area that can be manipulated into the company’s favor.

3. **Choose 3 specific business ethical dilemmas. Briefly describe how the issue was portrayed, how was the issue resolved, if at all, and how should the issue have been resolved.**

Nick struggles with a number of these business ethical issues throughout the film. The three specific business ethical dilemmas that I chose were:
1. How Nick lives with himself while he promotes products that knowingly destroy a person’s health;

2. Nick’s work/life balance dilemma; and

3. An issue of bribery.

Nick is perplexed with supporting and lobbying for a company that he knows kills people. He tussles with knowing that his company is established only to stretch the truth in favor of big tobacco. He uses what he calls the “Yuppie Nuremberg Defense” that he does this kind of work to “pay the mortgage.” During the film someone asks him “you look like a nice enough fellow, what are you doing working for these a**holes?” He replies, “I am good at it. I’m better doing this as I was ever doing anything else.” He knows that he is presented to the public as evil. He states that “few people on this planet know what it is to be truly despised. I earn a living fronting an organization that kills 1,200 human beings a day. We are talking two jumbo jet plane loads of men, women, and children. I mean there is Attila, Gangas, and me.” Nick resolves this internal struggle by justifying that his work supports the people’s right to liberty. He will also justify the negative health issues of smoking by suggesting that there are other products that can be more detrimental to your health. For example, during the film he is kidnapped by a group of anti-smoker extremists. His capturers force a plethora of nicotine patches on his body succumbing him into a mild coma. He awakens to hear his doctor telling him, his family, and his friends that “no nonsmoker could have handled the amount of nicotine you had in your bloodstream. I hate to say it, but smoking saved your life.” To him, this vindicates the bad image of smoking as smoking has some good side effects and that nicotine patches are the real killers. He always comes up with good excuses that support that he is doing the appropriate thing. Even at the end of the movie, he justifies his work by stating that he is “defending the defenseless, protecting the
disenfranchised corporations that have been abandoned by their very own consumers.” He then provides humorous examples of disenfranchised companies such as “…the logger, the sweatshop owner, the landmine developer, and the baby seal poacher.” In the end, he leaves the Academy for Tobacco studies to start his own public relations firm that supports other “Merchants of Death.” I guess I would have expected that he would have learned from his ordeals and see that his lobbying efforts were ethically wrong.

Another business ethical issue Nick struggles with is his work/life balance. Nick is a divorced “weekend dad” that struggles to find the right balance between his home life and his work life. He usually sides with his work life as he works constantly. Throughout the movie, he brings his son on numerous business trips as he doesn’t have time to bring him elsewhere. He also has a real tough time explaining to his son what he does for a living. He states that to be a lobbyist “you need a moral flexibility that goes beyond most people.” His son then asks him if he has flexible morals. Nick gives an example of “let’s say you became a lawyer, and you are asked to defend a child murderer. Now the law states that everyone deserves a fair trial. Would you defend them?” His son states that “I guess every person deserves a fair defense” and Nick responds “so do multi-national corporations.” Nick never really balances his work and personal life. Instead he starts his own PR firm, which will consume even more of his personal time. If anything, he distorts his son’s view of him as his son ends up looking at him as a “god” and wants his dad to succeed at manipulating the public. His son gets great pride from the actions of his father. The issue would be better resolved if his son learned the errors of his father’s ways and decided not to follow in his father’s footsteps.

Finally, the film portrays how big tobacco uses bribery for their benefit. Nick is told to bring a briefcase filled with cash to the original Marlboro Man to “shut him up.” The Marlboro Man
had recently been diagnosed with cancer and has been publicly preaching the harmful effects of tobacco. The tobacco executive tells Nick it is not a bribe, but a “debt of gratitude that he will have to shut up.” As Nick presents the briefcase to the Marlboro Man, the Marlboro Man instantly states “my dignity is not for sale.” Nick cleverly states that “it is not an offer, it is a gift. The idea is that somehow the guilt will prevent you from bad mouthing us.” The Marlboro Man states “are you supposed to be telling me this?” Nick responds “no Sir.” The Marlboro Man states “why are you telling me this?” This is when Nick makes his full spin by stating “because this way you will take the money because you’re mad. You will call up MSNBC. You will pour all of the money on the floor. Don’t forget to shake every last dollar out. Then you will donate it and start a cancer foundation.” The Marlboro Man states “what about my family?” Nick responds “you can’t keep the money. You can’t denounce us and keep the money. You keep all of the money or you give it all away.” Later Nick’s son asks “Dad how did you know he would take the money?” Nick responds “you would have been crazy not to have taken the money. When I saw he wasn’t crazy, I knew he would take the money.” The issue was never resolved as the corporation got away with bribing the Marlboro Man to keep his mouth shut. Obviously bribing is illegal and ideally this would be better resolved if the tobacco companies got in legal trouble for this bribe.

4. Overall, what did you learn from this exercise?

Overall, I learned that you can’t believe everything that you hear from so called “experts.” Every group has a way to spin the information to favor their side of the story. You have to hear all sides and make your own educated decision on a topic. Like the book Trust Us, We’re Experts!, this movie helped me become a better “spin detector.” Just because a non-profit may sound like a legitimate independent focus group, you really need to research what the group really stands for and what companies or people back them. The Academy of Tobacco Studies
sounded like a legitimate independent group to discover valid research. However, conglomerate tobacco financed them and influenced their priorities.

I also learned that it is very important to believe in what you are doing. You cannot genuinely work for a company that doesn’t align with your ethical viewpoints. I personally would not work for a company that would promote tobacco products. The movie portrays the negative effects on your life when you work for a company that doesn’t share your ethical values.