Ethics Critique of Wall•E (The Movie)

Basic Movie Premise

The movie Wall•E is a Pixar production from 2008 and portrays an earth that has been devastated by the overconsumption of humans. The movie opens with the view of a single machine named Wall•E working to complete his programmed directive, which in his case is to compress waste left behind by humans into a small block and then stack these blocks on one another. Wall•E is not the only machine left on earth with a directive; however, he is the only machine that remains functional 700 years after their original deployment.

It becomes clearly evident that Wall•E is different from all of the other machines in the sense that he is self-aware. What I mean by this is that Wall•E has desires outside of his official directive and that he has a curiosity about him. The curiosity of Wall•E eventually leads to him meeting a new robot (Eva) who has been sent from the Axiom (the spaceship where all of humans now live) whose directive is to find evidence of plant-life on earth.

Portrayal of Business in the Movie

Throughout the movie we see that Buy•N•Large (BNL) manufactured most everything on earth (that is now considered garbage); additionally, even Wall•E himself is a product of BNL. There are two basic views on how business was portrayed throughout this movie: that BNL is bad or that BNL is good. Lets start by analyzing the argument that BNL is portrayed positively (BNL is good) first.
Most capitalists would say that businesses produce the goods and services that consumers desire; therefore, a corporation shouldn’t be blamed for the unintended consequences of consumer demand. If we apply this theoretical framework to the BNL it would be logical to say that BNL was producing the goods and services that the individuals of earth desired and were therefore, acting in an ethical fashion. The society portrayed in the movie was a society that desired everything and was afforded the luxury of having it all because there was a machine for every task. There is a billboard in the movie that even states “BNL – Everything you need to be happy!”; therefore, under this premise BNL is meeting the needs of the customer and is portrayed in an ethical, positive light.

The alternative view that can be taken is that BNL is unethical and does whatever they need to do to continue to grow (this argument can be extrapolated to mean profits but in the movie there is no mention of corporate profits). The definition of growth in the movie doesn’t mean having control of one market, rather it means producing everything, including being the government. However, in the process of controlling everything they produce more garbage than the earth can support. The production of these goods eventually creates a situation where the earth becomes uninhabitable due to the toxic nature of all the garbage. Therefore, by not acting in an ethical and responsible manner BNL destroys the ability to live on earth for all human beings.

Both of the previous viewpoints are legitimate views and could represent anyone’s opinion on the ethicality of BNL; however, if we use Kohlberg’s stages of moral development as a guide to determine ethical decision making we may be able to arrive at more than an opinion.¹ According to Kohlberg there are two extremes within moral development: a stage one decision considers only yourself (the individual) whereas, a stage six decision maker demonstrates mutual respect for all. In order to use Kohlberg’s stages of moral development as a guide we must accept that a decision based on stage 1 would be considered the least ethical and a stage 6 decision as most ethical. Based on these assumptions we would find that BNL did not act in an ethical manner and was therefore, portrayed in a negative light. We can conclude this because BNL made decisions that weren’t in the best interest of all
people and were more about the corporation than anyone else, even the earth (if viewed as an entity).

3 Ethical Business Dilemmas

1. Produce what consumers demand

Throughout the course of Wall•E we see consumers getting everything that they desire at the touch of a button. The consumers aboard the Axiom were able to change the color of their clothes by simply touching a button. They had the ability to be completely networked with one another via video feeds; therefore, they never even desired any personal communication. All of the meals served on the Axiom came in a cup and could be consumed anytime of day that they wanted.

The society (people aboard the Axiom) were devoid of any responsibilities (social or otherwise) and only needed to attend to their own needs. The movie even displays robots providing education to all of the children on the ship. When teaching the children the alphabet they used the following example: “A is for Axiom your home sweet home, B is for BNL your very best friend.” The parents of these children had no responsibility for their upbringing and demanded that the robots provide the education. Ultimately, this education centered on what BNL wanted the children to know, to continue the success of BNL.

The issue of producing what was demanded was eventually transformed into reliance on BNL (reliance is often the by-product of others (machines or otherwise) doing work for you). This cycle was eventually broken when the captain of the ship decided that they needed to return to earth then he discovered that life was now sustainable there. In the movie we see an epic struggle between the autopilot (BNL) and the captain to return to earth, in which the captain prevailed. When the Axiom returned to earth society developed a much more balanced role with the machines and created a sustainable existence. This existence was no longer portrayed as sole reliance on BNL but rather as healthy coexistence based on mutual respect.
I believe that given the situation that the Axiom had been in space for 700 years (was supposed to be a 5 year “cruise”) I would have done the same thing as the captain did. There was a quote in the movie by the captain in response to a video file sent by the CEO of BNL in 2110 (around the time the Axiom departed earth). The CEO instructed the captain to stay the course on the Axiom not to return to earth, the captain's response was “I don't want to just survive I want to live!” I think that the captain identified that there is more to life then just surviving and relying on BNL and he wanted to experience that life.

To address the issue from an earlier standpoint (prior to being aboard the Axiom for 700 years) as a consumer I would have demanded that BNL not always produce what consumers want, but rather sometimes produce what consumers need. This need might come in several forms like: jobs, the development of personal and professional directives for society or the philosophy that corporate growth is not the end-all be-all. I think the society in Wall•E, as well as our society need to reevaluate the position that growth is a requirement for success.

2. How much power should any one corporation have?

In the movie we see a world that is completely dominated by one corporation BNL. At one point in the movie we see, an issue of the Buy•N•Large Times with the title “Too Much Trash!! Earth Covered” with the subheading “BNL CEO Declared Global Emergency.” It also appears throughout the movie that BNL has produced all of the garbage that now plagues the earth. BNL performs all of the day-to-day tasks that the society requires, they provide all of the education for the next generation, they control the time of day and are the sole controller of what society experiences; however, when it eventually comes to relinquishing control back to the consumer, BNL is unwilling to turn control back over to society.

Similarly to the way that the first ethical dilemma is handled; this issue is addressed by the captain of the Axiom. After a struggle with the autopilot, the captain is able to turn the autopilot onto manual status. The decision to relinquish control was relatively easy in this case; however, we know that in reality changes in power aren’t as easy as flipping a switch. Even in today’s society corporations
invest a great amount of time and money to generate control and market share; therefore, it shouldn’t be surprising to us that when consumers demand a corporation have less control that the corporations often push back.

If we were to find ourselves today in a situation where a corporation had excessive power, I believe that there are several ways to combat this power struggle. As we have discussed in class, a society has a tremendous amount of power through the election and legislative pathways; however, I believe that neither of this compare to the power that an individual has with their money. Being that much of the world (including the US) operates in a capitalistic marketplace where consumers hold a tremendous amount of power with their pocketbooks. Consequently, if consumers act with a unified voice and chose not to purchase a good or service, corporations will frequently respond to the demands of consumers. The time in which consumers require the assistance of government is when a corporation holds monopolistic control of a product that is vital to life and is causing harm because of their policies. It is at times like this that consumers must use their elected officials to help resolve these problems with legislation.

3. The ends justify the means (complete your directive no matter the cost to society or yourself)

Throughout the movie we witness many of the machines encounter a point where they’re required to decide how they should carry out their assigned directive. As a corporation we know that BNL’s mission was to provide “Everything you need to be happy.” In BNL’s quest to accomplish their mission they destroyed earth through the production of excessive goods and toxins. BNL was determined to achieve their mission, and what we witness in the movie is that all of the machines that were only concerned about completing their directives died; therefore, BNL died as a consequence of their goals. Take for example all of the machines on earth who’s original purpose was to clean-up earth, and in the end broke down, to be cleaned-up by who were left. Wall•E was an exception to this rule, and consequently Wall•E was the only machine on earth that was still running. Wall•E was self-aware to the point that he understood there was more to life than work, he didn’t fully
understand what this meant but he knew it existed. It was also a consequence of this awareness that he was able to fix himself when he broke down.

We saw other machines make similar decisions that Wall•E did, including Eva, and Mo (who cleaned up foreign contaminants), to the robots that were deemed defective. Then in the conclusion of the movie we saw the machines that made the personal decision to be larger than their corporate directives survive, while the true robots died. Where is the ethical decision in all of this? I believe that the ethical decision is as a corporation do we view the world as people that are on our team or not on our team (who we get rid of), or do we acknowledge that there is a larger purpose for us all and that we need individuals within corporations that don’t agree with the current corporate policy. In the movie we observe the effects of BNL’s single way of thinking, which ultimately led to the downfall of earth and of BNL in the end (by the captain taking control away from the autopilot (BNL)).

Given the decision on how best to deal with BNL (after being in space for 700 years) I would have had to deal with it the same as the captain did. The way I would have helped BNL from an ethical standpoint before they destroyed earth would have been to encourage diversity within the corporation. The concept of groupthink is tremendously dangerous and the best way to address it is through challenging conventional ideals and eliciting open feedback. I think that Wall•E had it right in that we need to decide what is important in our own lives and assess if these personal values align with the corporate values of businesses we interact with. If the answer to this question is no, then I think it us up to the individual to decide if they are willing to concede their ideals or fight for them.

If an employee has the courage to pursue what they believe to be ethically right, they need to know that the chain reaction could be significant. In the case of Wall•E when he was faced with the decision to follow Eva into the hallway of moving traffic he knew he wasn’t following protocol or his directive. By not following these rules Wall•E caused a large pileup of machines that were trying to complete their own directives.
The challenge in all of this is for an employee is to determine what rules are in place for their protection and what directives are not in their best interest. Once an employee decides that a rule (or directive) is not ethical for them, they need to be aware that their decision may have a large impact on others in the corporation (may have the potential to create more work for some, or the need to redo work for others). However, an employee that takes an ethical stand might also find that others hold the same ethical view and join their cause.

What was learned from this exercise?

Although I believe that there are many lessons that can be learned from a relatively simple movie like Wall-E, I found two distinct takeaways from the movie and this exercise. The first lesson is that diversity within an organization or group is always a positive attribute. Often times we surround ourselves with people that have been trained the same and hold the same ideals to be true as ourselves. We do this because it is easy and convenient; however, the danger is that we may not see the obstacles that lie ahead of us. I find it hard to believe that if BNL had been composed of employees who thought differently and had differing ideals that they would have gone down the path they did. If we believe that there is a broad array of individuals who encompass the various levels of moral development, we should then also believe that having this diversity on a team would provide strength and profitability to your organization.

The second lessoned learned from this exercise and in my opinion the most important is that each one of use needs to find our own personal mission (directive). We saw that in the case of Wall-E his personal directive was not to compress trash but it was the need to interaction with others. From the beginning Wall-E interacted with the cockroach and then when he met Eva he desired it that much more. Within our own lives we are required to work to serve various societal needs; however, is our work the reason we are here, or is there something else. What this class and movie have taught me more than anything else is that I need to continually identify
and live my personal mission. I was once told that each one of us have 168 hours in a week, how do you want to spend it. I have just started to define my personal mission and I hope that it grows with me throughout my life, and that I am always mindful of that mission.

References: