

7-1-2011

## Maud Lavin: Push Comes to Shove : New Images of Aggressive Women

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### Recommended Citation

Herz, Deborah (2011) "Maud Lavin: Push Comes to Shove : New Images of Aggressive Women," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol5/iss1/6>

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**Maud Lavin: *Push comes to shove : new images of aggressive women***

Cambridge, Mass : MIT Press, c2010, 300p ISBN 9780262123099 (hardcover : alk. paper)

*Reviewed by Deborah Herz, MBA, Managing Editor University Relations, Salve Regina University*

Psychologists, sociologists, film buffs and scholars of gender studies will applaud Maud Lavin's take on women and aggression in her new book, *Push Comes to Shove* (2010, The MIT Press).

"Aggression is necessary, large, messy, psychological, and physical," Lavin writes in the introduction to her book, which examines the topic through the eyes of the mass media. "In contemporary U.S. culture ... there exists for the first time in the nation's history, albeit unevenly, a growing, heavily viewed array of positive representations of aggressive women."

In her book, Lavin applauds this cultural shift and examines how these images are evolving, how we shape them, and how this new cultural movement impacts women's lives. "I define aggression as the use of force to create change – fruitful, destructive, or a mix of the two," Lavin writes. "Aggression is also necessary for radical democracy and the exercise of dissent."

Beginning with representations of women in sports as depicted in film, *Push Comes to Shove* also examines images of female aggression in relation to ageing, the darker side of aggression expressed by violence, artists and writers of African-American descent, and women artists, activists and groups.

If art is a reflection of a culture's conscience, then Lavin's thesis – that aggression is essential to obtain justice – also suggests the opposite – that art, and particularly film and television – can reshape a culture's consciousness.

In her opening chapter, *Sibling Play*, Lavin explores the ideas, images, and myths of sibling aggression operating in contemporary sports teams through film, where aggression is used to exert power and win, rather than harm other individuals.

Complete with color photos of clips from several films, *Push Comes to Shove* reiterates that as art forms, these films "provide a model for thinking about what other forms and fantasies of aggression might look like." She argues that these fantasies matter now more than ever when, "for the first time in U.S. history, the majority of a generation of women has grown up playing sports."

In her chapter on Aging and Aggression, Lavin takes on another cultural icon – the middle-aged woman, who is represented by the iconic British detective superintendent inspector, Jane Tennison (played by Helen Mirren) of "Prime Suspect" fame. "To get to the truth you have to be quite brutal," says Lynda LaPlante, the writer who created the popular television series that aired from 1991-2006. "What people were not used to seeing at the time was a woman doing it."

“She’s a rude woman,” Lavin writes about the character of Jane Tennison. And Mirren herself says of the role, “As an actress the thing I like most about her is her unlikeability.”

Breaking down some of the stereotypes of women and aging, Lavin argues that the image of the serene, wise, over-50 woman sitting in a lotus position, as depicted by advertising agencies, pharmaceutical companies and the mass media, is a dangerous one. “Obligatory serenity can be dangerous,” Lavin explains. “We mid-lifers are starved for positive stereotypes, specifically mass-culture images of healthy women over 50, and this has made us susceptible to the one of yogic calm. ... I’d assert that as a norm it’s a pitch for passivity and a repressive one at that.”

“There is much to be angry about concerning ageism in the workplace, and much to lobby aggressively against in terms of age discrimination and unfairness,” Lavin writes. Anger, more than merely a catalyst for change, Lavin also argues, “isn’t enough: aggressive action is called for ...” particularly when it comes to shattering some of the repressive stereotypes of older women.

Lavin’s witty, insightful and acerbic observations keep the book from becoming an overly academic read, along with illustrations, photos, a 15-page index and 21 pages of end notes. Her exhaustive research covers everything from repressive images of women by the media to the role of anger in creating meaningful change.

Eclectic and esoteric at times, *Push Comes to Shove* is grounded in solid social research. Whether Lavin is exploring the dynamics of female boxing, examining the role of power and productivity in the workplace, or studying aggression in relation to sports films, she remains a champion of aggression, again and again reiterating that aggression is essential not to establish dominion over others, but to work productively with others to create change.

Note: Maud Lavin is Professor of Visual and Critical Studies and Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* and *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (MIT Press, 2001).

Readers interested in hearing more from Lavin can watch a video of her interview with Emma James discussing *Push Comes to Shove: New Images of Aggressive Women* by visiting: <http://fnewsmagazine.com/wp/2010/11/interview-with-maud-lavin/>