Latex & lingerie. Shopping for pleasure at Ann summers parties

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As an expatriate of the US, I must admit that I had never heard of Ann Summers parties. My experience with home shopping has been limited to my mother's Tupperware parties in the late 1950s (young suburban 'Moms' sitting in each other's living rooms laughing, eating enormous quantities of cake, and buying hideous plastic bowls). Before reading *Latex & lingerie*, I would have viewed such all-women's shopping parties as frivolous, somewhat embarrassing, and of little interest to feminists. I was wrong, however. Merl Storr makes a convincing case for why feminists should take such gatherings very seriously, indeed.

Since their inception in 1970, Ann Summers parties have been enormously popular in the UK, with nearly 4,000 parties being held every week. They are a hybrid shopping and social event, where women over the age of 18 years can buy sexy lingerie, erotic fashion, and sex toys, while imbibing large quantities of alcohol and chocolate, playing risqué party games, and generally having a 'good laugh with the girls.' In practice, most of the guests are white, working class, stay-at-home mothers of young children and all are militantly heterosexual. For this reason, they are a perfect site to explore the anatomy of female homosociability and the ways in which this particular brand of heterosexual femininity is constructed.

Storr provides a wonderful ethnography of Ann Summers, based on hours of attending parties, interviewing party organizers who sell the products and supervise the entertainment and hostesses who invite the guests and provide living room space for the festivities. She shows how Ann Summers parties provide a space for women to have a 'night in with the girls', a temporary respite from domestic duties, male partners, and children, where they can celebrate their sexual desire in an all-women setting without fear of transgressing the boundaries of heterosexuality.

Storr shows how the participants collectively police the dangerous line between heterosexuality and homosexuality through power strategies aimed at strengthening gender identification ('one of the girls') and excluding those who don't 'fit' in (notably, lesbians, women of colour, and 'posh' women). Teasing, 'bitching', and 'lesbophobia' are rampant, making the gatherings more than just fun and laughter.

'To call Ann Summers a phallocentric culture would be something of an understatement,' Storr notes (p. 106). But partygoers are nothing if not irreverent about men's willies, making endless jokes about their size and shape, eating enormous quantities of 'chocolate willies', and playing party games like 'pin the willy on the man' or 'bouncing bollocks.' The parties provide an outlet for

women's aggression against men. At the same time, women at Ann Summers parties construct themselves as the objects of male desire and are careful to assuage their male partner's anxieties with reassurances that sexy underwear are for *his* eyes only and the sexy vibrators are for use *together*, never by a woman alone.

Latex & lingerie is theoretically innovative. It provides a long overdue elaboration of sociological studies of gender and homosociality (most notably by Bob Connell) with a framework for analysing all-female gatherings as gender regimes. Heterosexuality emerges as something, which is not only constructed across sexes, but among women. It offers a feminist reading of heterosexuality, which does not treat it as the product of 'false consciousness' and victimization, but as a space for pleasure and desire. It demonstrates convincingly how essential intersectionality is for understanding femininity as never just about gender but always simultaneously class-based and racialized. Being 'one of the girls' at an Ann Summers party means being a *white* girl (p. 63). And, last but not the least, Storr manages to transform even the most difficult and convoluted feminist theory into easy reading (her exposition of Lacan's distinction between the phallus and penis is a 'must read').

My only criticism is Storr's characterization of Ann Summers as post-feminism – a term I find misleading. It seems to imply that feminism can be neatly situated in time as an ideological entity. The power relations, which Storr describes so accurately among Ann Summers partygoers, could probably be observed in gatherings of self-proclaimed feminists. Storr is certainly on the mark, however, with her argument that Ann Summers parties can not be discarded as straightforwardly anti-feminist with their affirmation of women's equal right to sexual pleasure and freedom of choice. They fail, however, to question the naturalness of heterosexuality and gender and their protest against gender inequalities never seems to get beyond a complaint: 'men are useless but we love them anyway.'

But I especially liked Storr's refusal to answer the question of whether the parties are 'good' or 'bad.' She consistently avoids narrow or simplistic explanations, arguing that Ann Summers parties (and, by implication, other forms of female homosociality) are more complicated. They are spaces where women can have a lot of fun, but only under the condition that they are willing and able to follow the rules. She concludes: 'Only when these rules have been overturned will gender equality and sexual liberation have become anything more than a post-feminist fantasy' (p. 222). Perhaps in the meantime, we can make do with this enjoyable and thoughtful look at one women's space, which deserves any feminist's most serious attention.

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