Representations of Environmental Activism on Television: Case Studies of the Environmentalist on Contemporary American Sitcoms
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Abstract
While fictional television shows are often dismissed as mere entertainment vehicles, such popular culture texts are incredibly powerful tools that convey ideas about what constitutes common sense in American culture. These texts can also be tools in the dissemination of alternative or oppositional ideologies. This research analyzes four specific episodes of American sitcoms in order to understand the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies about environmental activism that are circulated by such texts. These episodes are from four contemporary sitcoms: Arrested Development, Better Off Ted, How I Met Your Mother, and 30 Rock.

Results indicate that these episodes do reinforce some dominant ideologies about environmentalism. The activist is sometimes portrayed as marginal to the norms of American capitalist culture. Environmentalism is also intertwined with consumerism in most cases, creating a powerful image of activism through consumption. These are not the only portrayals of environmentalism, though: all episodes locate a desire for environmental change in an urban rather than a rural context. Through words, images, and humor, these sitcoms can open an epistemological space wherein environmental activism is integrated into urban and corporate cultures. Environmentalism is not always marginal, nor is it necessarily undertaken from a rural idealist perspective. This analysis shows the potential power that television, particularly the sitcom genre, has to recontextualize the environmentalist’s place in American society.