Ruling sorcerers turn impoverished humans into monsters and mushrooms … that is the anime *Dorohedoro*!

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Dorohedoro is a science-fantasy anime television series based on Japanese author and illustrator Q Hayashida's manga [comic or graphic novel]. The manga began serialization in late November 2000 and concluded in late 2018.

MAPPA, a powerhouse studio, known for works like *Yuri On Ice* (2016), *Kakegurui* (2017-18) and the final season of *Attack on Titan* (2021-22), produced the series. *Dorohedoro* aired on Japanese television between January and March 2020. In May 2020, the series had a worldwide streaming release on Netflix, in 13 episodes.

Dorohedoro is set partially in a post-apocalyptic industrial world, known as the Hole, where humans face the constant threat of being "practiced on" by sorcerers. The bizarre story follows Nikaido, a female cook and owner of the Hungry Bug restaurant, and Caiman, a man working as a medic who has lost his memory and has a lizard head due to an unknown sorcerer's magic, in their quest to kill sorcerers and recover Caiman's identity.

Meanwhile, En, a crime lord whose organization, The Family, rules the sorcerers' world, sends his "cleaners," Noi and Shin, to eliminate his enemies, the Cross Eyes. Nikaido and Caiman's rampage and Caiman's possible affiliation with the Cross Eyes inevitably lead to a clash. Many diversions and complications ensue in the highly elaborate series, with the season adapting roughly 40 of the manga's 167 chapters.

MAPPA's animation and direction involve notable experimentation and use of newer techniques, such as melding colored 3-D models with 2-D animation and detailed backgrounds, embodying Hayashida's striking visuals with fluid animation, pacing and editing. (K)NoW_NAME's soundtrack is fittingly diverse, fusing varied genre influences and tones, balancing comical tracks with serious, grimy industrial ones. These elements provide crucial support for the adaptation, bringing out the strengths of Hayashida's work.

Anime and manga, especially modern entries, are notorious for their lack of interest in and connection with important social realities. They often favor risk-free and simplistic (sometimes juvenile) humor, fictional world-building and/or excessive carnage to make up for the absence of genuine artistic substance.

Anime is immensely popular and has a devoted following. In 2020 alone, nearly 180 new and ongoing anime series were aired. There are standouts in the genre—such as *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Berserk*, *Akira*, *Fullmetal Alchemist* or even *Shiki*—but most efforts remain unremarkable, rehashing the same anodyne ideas and tropes seen again and again in past decades.

Dorohedoro manages to go beyond this, standing out both stylistically and artistically. To a certain extent, it represents a serious and blackly humorous attempt to examine contemporary life, or aspects of it. While the apocalyptic setting draws heavily from 1980s anime and manga, *Dorohedoro*'s focus on small shop owners and part-time medical staff at a local hospital is refreshing. The sorcerers' influence on the Hole, which they invade from their world, is horrific, often resembling real-life war and industrial calamity (and their "experiments" on humans evoke the Nazi experience).

"Practiced on" humans often remain disfigured and incapacitated, or they die. The Hole itself has become infected with the sorcerers' magic, depicted as black smoke, shown in magic acid rain and fog that annually becomes thick enough to raise the dead as zombies, which residents then must hunt down and re-kill. Culture is virtually non-existent, while simple pastimes take place in dramatically dilapidated circumstances, for example,

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baseball diamonds dotted with bottomless sinkholes.

The series takes some inspiration from Lewis Carroll's famed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Caiman, troubled by the loss of his identity, brings to mind Carroll's Alice in certain ways. Similarly, Nikaido resembles the White Rabbit that Alice chases. She briefly sports bunny ears and wields magic said to manipulate time. Meanwhile, En, who turns anyone in his way into a mushroom, and the imagery involving the sorcerers' smoke (the source of their powers) suggest heavily the pompous, hookah-smoking blue caterpillar Alice encounters.

The near pristine architecture and absurd, often grotesque excesses of the sorcerers' world are juxtaposed to the violent, internal competition between affluent-type layers and the ruling cliques. Hell and the demons who run it act as an oppressive government bureaucracy in the sorcerers' world.

En's Family is apparently inspired by the *yakuza* (the Japanese mafia, which has notoriously embedded itself in Japanese political and economic life for decades). The social and historical amorphousness, the weak side of Hayashida's work, means that there is no concrete explanation for the Family's establishment and its relation to the "government." It simply arose by force.

Japanese increasingly thuggish and militaristic development over the past several decades finds indirect expression in Hayashida's artistic work. The rehabilitation of the Japanese ruling elite's viciously authoritarian, anti-democratic past and traditions is inevitably bound up with renewed attacks on the working class and political opposition.

While the world of *Dorohedoro* undergoes change over time, the series creators' failure to account for the change often derails the series' better intentions. As noted, En and his Family emerge purely out of the carnage. Similarly, a briefly mentioned anti-sorcerer kill squad, said to have ruled over the Hole years earlier, fell to Shin's magic. The series takes short-cuts in this fashion, or simply pads out the areas where no real light is shed. Hayashida's over-reliance on violence, which is often graphic and excessive, further reveals the same limitations in her outlook. In this regard, she takes the easy way out.

Too often, character relations and interactions, often complex and naturally developed, and interesting details of the world they take place in, are put aside for more mind-numbing violence. Shin and Noi's competitive friendship-turned-romance blossoming over an extended period, with entire chapters devoted to their history together, is frequently overshadowed by hit jobs and inconsequential fight scenes. Darker comical scenes sometimes veer off course with character deaths thrown out as light jokes, leaving audience members unclear as to how they should feel about the value of human life

One episode briefly focuses on Nikaido's kidnapping by a desperate and confused young man who aims to collect enough residual smoke from the bodies of hospitalized sorcerer victims to become a sorcerer himself and escape a wretched existence in the Hole. After Caiman rescues Nikaido and kills the individual in self-defense, the former laments the disorientation the conditions of their society have inflicted on youth. The events strikingly reflect the real-life upsurge of mass violence, and mass stabbings in Japan's case, in the midst of the crisis of the global profit system. The issues are merely touched upon, however.

In 2019, following the completion of *Dorohedoro*, Hayashida began a new fantasy sci-fi manga series, *Dai Dark*. With a vagabond protagonist constantly threatened by death, an outer space realm of disturbing creatures and a power-hungry cult akin to the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages looming over everything, Hayashida's new world seems to again draw inspiration from a socially unequal and deadly reality of modern capitalism.

The difficulties and "gaps" in Hayashida's work, including its overriding "darkness," are not simply the result of personal weakness or social blindness. They reflect, at least in part, Japanese social realities, the paralysis of the working class ferociously suppressed by the unions and the official left. The re-emergence of the class struggle in Japan, as elsewhere, creates the possibility of artists' drawing encouragement from mass popular opposition and activity, and finding new sources of inspiration.

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