Since the launch of his viral marketing campaign for THE LAST EXORCISM, which favored post-viewing tweets from horror fans over professional critical consensus, Eli Roth's philosophy as a producer has championed the democratization of film spectatorship. That attention to a multiplicity of voices has informed the bulk of his moviemaking process as well, including his stint co-writing and producing RZA's directorial debut THE MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS (out on theatrical-cut and unrated DVDs and Blu-ray/DVD combo from Universal Studios Home Entertainment today). Fango spoke with Roth about the ins and outs of that process during his work in China for RZA's dream project, and the themes and cultural influences that pervade his filmography.

FANGORIA: The bulk of your work thus far—from the HOSTEL films to AFTERSHOCK, which you produced and co-starred in in Chile, to THE MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS—has been shot on foreign soil. It's as if you're more at ease outside the bounds of domestic production.

ELI ROTH: While I was shooting AFTERSHOCK, I had the idea for [his upcoming cannibal shocker] GREEN INFERNO and really got inspired to finish the script. I've never been to the Peruvian Amazon, but I learned a lot about it, and got excited to go there. When I look at the last 10 years of my life—I've shot in Prague, Iceland, Canada, China and Chile, and I love it. I find it so exciting to dive into another culture, and see how they do things. When you're in one country, you get stuck in a very particular way of working. The way we shot AFTERSHOCK felt like that fun and energy of being a kid again, when you grab a camera and do what you want. It was a whole different mentality. I could help show them the way we do things in America and they showed me the way they did things in Chile. With each production, you try to bring that to the next one to create a system that works best for you.

I always go by story first, rather than where I want to shoot. Sometimes I'll say, "It'd be fun to live [in a particular place]. What's a story I can shoot there?" Film is an amazing way to travel. I'm interested in the planet, and there's no better way to learn about a culture than by going and living there, and to make a film there, because you're working with people from that country, and if you're there for a considerable amount of time, you *really* learn it. As a writer, it gives you a different perspective on the planet. I also want to make movies that are different and interesting and groundbreaking and fun, and often, when you want to do something different, people aren't going to give you a lot of money. It's too big of a risk, and everyone's scared to lose their jobs. So when you want to do something unique, you have to do it on a lower budget, and shooting in other countries is much more cost-effective. But for me, it's always about story, and I'm always up for an adventure.

FANG: The HOSTEL films are about the obliviousness of young people while they're on their travels. It's a stark contrast to the more rugged, powerful figures who populate FISTS. What was that writing process like for you, fleshing out those more world-weary people?

ROTH: Every time I sit down to write a story, I think, "Oh, this one is completely different—I have a great idea for a movie." I write it, and it winds up being about three friends who go to another country and something horrible happens to them [*laughs*]. AFTERSHOCK has traces of that, too. But with FISTS, the way I wrote with [RZA] was, I related it to Wu-Tang Clan. He wrote a lot of those lyrics. I said, "When you're writing for Ol' Dirty Bastard, it's different from what you write for Raekwon, what you write for Method Man, what you write for GZA." GZA has incredible lyrics—he's brilliant—but it's different from ODB. I said, "When a girl walks by, you know what Dirty would say, what GZA would say, what Inspectah Deck would say, what you would say." Everybody would make a different comment about that girl, all expressing the same thing, but in their own unique way. That's what makes a story great. If you look at CABIN FEVER, there are lots of minor characters, but even if they only appear for a minute, I wanted them to feel like for that one scene, you could have a whole subplot about them. That's what we learned from Quentin Tarantino [who godfathered IRON FISTS]—every character has their own purpose, their own backstory.

STAR WARS was one of the models for this movie. I knew what every droid was, but that's because George Lucas had thought it out. That's what Peter Jackson does when he adapts LORD OF THE RINGS—it's a 360-degree world. That's what made AVATAR great. James Cameron knows every plant on that planet. I said, "That's what we need to do. We can't just write cool lines and dialogue. We can't just write fight scenes. We can't even begin to write until we know who we're writing about. We have to know these characters the way you know every member of Wu-Tang, the way you know every member of your family, the way you know your best friend, and in any situation, you'd know how they'd react to it. Then we can start the story."

I was really using it as training for [RZA] to direct. Every time, we wrote about a different clan. I knew that a production designer was gonna go, "OK, the Wolf Clan: What are their weapons? What do they wear? What do they look like?" We made all the clans animals—the Wolf Clan, the Lion Clan, the Hyena Clan. Everything should be animals, like a jungle. They all have their own weapons. The lair has to look different. The way they dress is different. The Hyenas should be more wild, animalistic. The Lions should be proud; they're more regal, the kings of the jungle. Then the Wolves should look like scavengers, like something out of THE ROAD WARRIOR. We talked about what the furniture in their dens should look like, how they behave and where they live in Jungle Village—just so we really understood what everyone's relationship to everyone else is.

FANG: You've been quoted as saying that producing is like your friend coming to you for advice about their relationship. How did your relationship with horror meet RZA's relationship with kung fu in the middle?

ROTH: I like martial-arts movies, but they were never my passion the way horror films were. But they are for RZA; he loves them inside and out. I had been to Iceland for New Year's with Tarantino, RZA and Elvis Mitchell, and we were flying back. Elvis and Quentin were going to New York, and RZA and I were going to LA, and we got snowed in in Boston. My parents were living there at the time, and we thought we were gonna stay at the airport for 10 hours, so I said, "Let's go to my parents' house for dinner!" We went to my parents' house in Newton, Massachusetts, and I was like, "Mom, I'm with RZA, I'm bringing him home for dinner…"

It turned out my dad and RZA grew up a block apart in Brooklyn. My dad came from a very dangerous, poverty-stricken area, and both he and RZA had built themselves up from that town, and had incredible careers. There was an instant respect for one another. They came from different generations, but they lived literally one block from one another. There was this

instant bond between RZA and my family. Then it turned out the flight was not cancelled, so we flew from Boston to LA, and on the way, he told me the whole story for IRON FISTS. This was the week before HOSTEL opened.

So over the years, I always kept checking in on what was happening with his movie. There were other producers who were trying to make it, and after INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS, I sat down with him and said, “Let’s do this for real. You have a story, but it’s not a script. It’s not a movie yet. It’s ideas, but if you want someone to give you money to direct this, it’s gotta be not only technically perfect, but we have to take everything we learned from Quentin as writers and filmmakers and apply it.”

FANG: There’s a moment in FISTS when a group of women ask Russell Crowe’s character Jack Knife if he’d like some “pleasure before business.” His response is, “You are business”; then he runs his finger across his blade and says, “This is pleasure.” Is it off-base to suggest that that close proximity of sex and violence owes a debt to your penchant for the conventions of the slasher film?

ROTH: I love lines like that, but that comes from a place of character. RZA had set up a situation with Jack Knife: What is he doing in the brothel with these hookers? What happens when things change, and you realize you’ve got this strange agenda? You know, it’s just the perfect setup for that line; then the guy twirls his knife and you think, “Oh shit, what is this guy gonna do?” Once you have the characters so clear and the situation set up, the dialogue just flows out. When you have an actor like Russell playing the role, it just begs for you to write really fun, juicy lines for him; he’s so fantastic at delivering them. When Russell came to Shanghai, I spent 24 hours in a hotel room with him, going through the script—every single line, trying to make it as fun as possible. We drank six bottles of wine, told stories, laughed and came up with crazier stuff. Russell really wanted to go for it.

Once you build the world, you really allow for a place for everybody to start participating. There were gonna be different fights in the script, and then the actors got there suddenly one guy was like, “I wanna fight more!” Then we’d realize, “Oh, Jack Knife should fight this guy!” Russell said, “I learned all these gun tricks on 3:10 TO YUMA!” You give everyone the right framework, you put the right people in it and everybody brings something special. But I was also very conscious of not making a movie where you’re exhausted at the end of it. I wanted to make a big movie that kicked your ass and was fun, but I find that some movies have, like, five too many fights, and by the end, I have a headache [*laughs*]. I don’t think it’s the fact that I’m 40 years old. I call it “fight fatigue”; by the end, you’ve seen the same fight five times. That’s something we were conscious of, making sure that every fight counted and was different. Each one, we introduced a new weapon, so that it was different from the previous one.

FANG: Your fixation with weaponry has been a guiding force in everything since the HOSTEL films, favoring shots in which a saw, a drill or a blowtorch become momentary stars; then there’s your Bear Jew character in BASTERDS, who makes almost fetishistic use of his bat. What kind of discussions did you and RZA have when developing the weapons for IRON FISTS?

ROTH: We wrote it to be set at the time when the Gatling gun was coming, which was the great equalizer. RZA did a great deal of historical research, and knew how the Gatling gun came in and how it changed everything. Suddenly everything all went out the window, because if you had one, you could just wipe everybody out. So the plot point was these people, the Jackal troops, coming in with a Gatling gun. If they don’t get their gold delivered to them, they’re just taking everybody out. All those intricate weapons don’t matter once the gun comes in, which was sort of what happened with the atomic bomb. There was a plot point about the time in which we set it, where we are in the history of weapons, what the British did, letting opium into China and getting the population up so they could control the whole population with drugs. So even though it’s fantasy, we based it all in a very physical circle.

FANG: And of course, there’s the issue of how best to represent the damage those weapons inflict. How did a frequent KNB collaborator like you arrive at the FX used in IRON FISTS?

ROTH: We had Jake Garber come over. First day, we put him in an acting role [*laughs*], and he was fantastic. Jake is so good at improvising that if we wanted to add a handicap position, we’d just do it. We did a ton of stuff practically. It’s fantasy, so at certain points there are flying blades and other things that we couldn’t do practically; we had to do it with CGI. We did almost all the gore physically, but every now and then we wanted to add a flourish, so we went digital. The movie’s really about traditional, old-school martial arts, and then adding new modern stuff.

You have these old guys who were in IRON MONKEY fighting hand-to-hand, old-style combat. The younger guys, some of them are flying around on wires, doing a lot of hand-to-hand, but then there's some CG weaponry. We wanted it to feel not so realistic, because it's a fantasy world.

FANG: Those fantastical elements are there in Dave Bautista's character. What's going on with him?

ROTH: Brass Body. Yeah, that's purely from RZA's head. He's like, "That's Brass Body. He's the baddest, and he can turn into brass." And it's like, "OK, we get it!" [*Laughs*] In the universe of the movie, it works. That's part of the fun of it: "I wanna be the guy who shoots the blade. I wanna be the guy who turns to brass. I wanna be the guy with the iron fists." It's fun watching them all crack down. It's a kung-fu adventure, but really we wanted this sort of hip-hop STAR WARS. Chewbacca's a wookie? OK! R2D2's a robot? Great! That's what makes it real, and the fun of it for me was taking it really, really seriously. None of it was ever silly. We had fun with the movie, for sure, but we wanted it to be a very real. RZA has this wild, vivid imagination. If Brass Body's gonna show up, and his skin turns to brass, we have to know what his relationship to the bad guys in Jungle Village are. That way, when they see each other and relate to one another, we understand why they're behaving the way they are. Once it was there, I could add my creativity to it, and my touch. "What if there's a Falcon Clan, and we see them for just one shot—and they don't say anything, but maybe we put them in another movie?"

FANG: Were either of you conscious of the storied tradition of shared production design between the Hammer and Shaw Brothers studios?

ROTH: We love those movies, but we weren't out to recreate or fetishize them. We obviously

have great respect for them and have nods to them, but we wanted to create something that looked like a modern movie. I was very clear about that. The films with dubbing, when they were shot in Chinese, weren't meant to be ironic, or to have that dubbed effect. So we could have that, but a little of it can go a long way. Just to show that yes, we love these movies, here's our moment of that, but we're making a modern film. We wanted something that would play to the FAST AND THE FURIOUS crowd. We don't want people to feel like they have to have done their homework to see the movie. We want people to say, "Oh, I really loved this. I didn't realize I could enjoy these movies. I'll go back and watch the old ones and see what's up." We talked about the different styles, but when we looked at shooting, there's only one Shaw studio now. So we shot in China. It was an amazing experience, one of the best I've had. But it was a very tough shoot. Very tough.