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Bernardo Bertolucci: Hollywood Films Aren't As Good As Television

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- * American Academy in Rome honours Bertolucci
- * Likes Mad Men, other series, more than big screen productions
- * Bertolucci will chair international jury at Venice Film Festival

By Philip Pullella

ROME, May 28 (Reuters) - When he was 12, Bernardo Bertolucci looked in a mirror and imagined himself as John Wayne. Now, at 73, he is confined to a wheelchair but is still a towering figure of Italian cinema.

Today, the Oscar-winning director is disappointed with the Hollywood that once inspired him and prefers television series such as "Mad Men", saying they are better casted and better directed than big screen productions.

Bertolucci discussed his love affair with American culture - and his disdain for what Hollywood is producing today - on Monday night when he was honoured by the American Academy in Rome.

"Jazz was the first music I heard in my life and jazz for me meant America," Bertolucci told the crowd at the gala benefit to fund grants for artists.

The Academy, the oldest American overseas centre for independent study of the arts and humanities, honoured Bertolucci with the prestigious McKim award, whose previous recipients include conductor Riccardo Muti, composer Ennio Morricone, director Franco Zeffirelli and writer Umberto Eco.

"I saw 'Stagecoach' and for me (director) John Ford became Homer," he said of the classic American Western film made in 1939, a year before he was born in the northern Italian city of Parma.

"I was in front of a full-length mirror and what I was seeing at 12 wasn't me, it was John Wayne."

But today, the director who made "Last Tango in Paris", "The Last Emperor" and "Novecento", says the Hollywood that once excited him now depresses him.

"My generation had an affair with American culture, there's no doubt about it. A street lamp and a fire hydrant made me sing in the rain."

"But the American films I like now do not come from Hollywood studios but from television series, like 'Mad Men', 'Breaking Bad', 'The Americans'," he said in interview after acceptance speech.

SAD HOLLYWOOD

"I like when they last 13 episodes but then there is a new series coming with another 13 episodes," he said, laughing, comparing them to novels printed in instalments in 19th century newspapers.

"Apart from a few independent productions, I think that everything that comes from Hollywood is generally sad. It makes me very sad".

Last year Bertolucci made his first feature film in nearly a decade with "Me and You," about an introverted 14-year-old teenager who tells his mother he is going on a ski trip but spends a week in the family basement with his drug addicted half-sister.

Like "Last Tango in Paris", which caused a scandal in Italy and beyond in 1972 for its sex scenes with Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider, "Me and You," was shot mostly indoors.

Bertolucci has spent a lot of time indoors since a back injury about 10 years ago confined him to a wheelchair, which he referred to at Monday night's event only as "the recent time of my life."

Still, despite physical and emotional difficulties resulting from the wheelchair confinement, Bertolucci says he wants to do what he can to promote culture between countries.

"Exchange of culture is the salvation of the world," he said, recalling how his father set him off on a quest for new experiences when he gave him a copy of "Moby Dick" as a young boy.

While he was still too young to read it, he said he knew that "somewhere there was a big landscape and a huge sky".

This year, Venice will be the backdrop for Bertolucci's vision when he serves as head of the international jury at the 70th edition of the Venice Film Festival, which runs from August 28 to September 7 in the lagoon city.

"I am going to nurture myself with cinema. To be the president of the jury will give me a great joy. I will be able to see beautiful experimental films," he said.

As for his own creative plans, Bertolucci is holding his cards close to his chest.

"I have some ideas but they are still amorphous, still at the germination stage," he said. (Reporting By Philip Pullella)