Good stories tend to get told and retold, over and over again, mutating in the process. They adapt to different times and places, taking on and sloughing off embellishments as they are handed on. They persist through a kind of evolution. This is how it has always been and how it must be. Tales cannot survive otherwise. But this does not mean that all mutations are equally acceptable. For critical discussion is part of the environment in which stories survive. So it is not misplaced to criticise a retelling for its divergence from the original.

At least, this is not misplaced if a central point of the story is lost in that divergence. For in that case, the essence of the story has not survived in the retelling. A film remake that is perfectly faithful to the original in all details would be a waste of time, much like a cover version that sounds exactly like the song covered. A good remake will owe some of its merit to its departures from the original, as might an adaptation of a novel or play for the screen. But when the essence of the story, or part of that essence, has been excised, the story itself has not really been retold. Instead, we are left with a different, usually shallower, tale masquerading as the original.

The recent remake of Alfie, replacing Michael Caine with Jude Law in the title role, is a case in point. The original is far better than the remake in its visual and auditory aesthetics, essential aspects of the medium in which this story is told. Lewis Gilbert’s original is an understated visual homage to London’s architectural heritage, whereas the remake presents a clichéd image of Manhattan as brash and glitzy after-dark playground. The original’s dramatic and sympathetic soundtrack, capturing equally the apparently carefree and the deeply rueful moments of the narrative through variations on a distinctive minor theme, was composed by Sonny Rollins and is now widely regarded as both a jazz classic and a film score classic. The remake replaces it with some bog standard soft rock power ballads.
More importantly, these differences in storytelling are matched by a qualitative difference in the story told. The remake takes only the surface layer of the original story and presents it as the whole story, thereby leaving the central character’s behaviour without any deep motivation, the sequence of events with no underlying logic, and the tale itself with no interesting purpose. In this version of the story, Alfie is interested only in uncomplicated sex with women he considers beautiful and so lives his life through casual relationships until some unfortunate incidents make him face up to the consequences this has for those around him and for their view of him. He therefore decides to settle down with his favourite woman, only to find that she has other ideas.

For this to be more than a basic morality tale about the lothario lifestyle, imparting a message we have all heard many times before and anyway could easily work out for ourselves, it would have to present some insight into why Alfie behaves like this. For the sequence of his affairs to have any meaning, it would have to be determined by that reason for his behaviour. And for his rejection by the woman he wants to settle down with to have any poignancy, rather than being just another event in a sequence, it would have to draw the preceding narrative together in some way. Yet the remake does not do any of this. Through this failure, it misses the whole point of the original story.

Alfie often seems, in the original film, to be a deeply misogynist character. He refers to women collectively as ‘birds’ and to each woman individually as ‘it’. Each of his lovers is unceremoniously dumped the moment she expresses any desire for anything more than a merely casual relationship. Even the mother of his child is expected to earn enough to keep herself and their son while he sees them only on Sundays to play at being a father. Cutting these aspects of the story out has left the remake with no presentation of the darkest side of its main character.

Doing so, moreover, has robbed the story of the contrast between this behaviour and the more tender and supportive attitudes the lead character sometimes takes towards women. For the original Alfie is not misogynist to the core. He does not hate women, nor is he indifferent to them, nor does he see them as mere objects, even though much of his behaviour does look this way. He genuinely feels for the women in his life, offers them advice, goes out of his way to help them out, dislikes them being sad, and is pleased when they are happy. This apparent inconsistency betrays a deeper motivation for his irresponsible womanising and misogynist language and behaviour.

For the original Alfie is really a rather sensitive and intelligent soul. Towards the end of the film, for example, he declares that ‘it ain’t through the eyes that you feel beauty, it’s how the heart hungers for something that makes it beautiful’. Many of his comments, to camera and otherwise, are similarly observant, nuanced, and considered. Such remarks are not the thoughts of someone too stupid to have
noticed that women have feelings or that actions have consequences. Perhaps this is why the remake casts Alfie as so inarticulate he needs to learn relatively ordinary words every day. The remake turns that thought about beauty into the statement that ‘looks aren’t everything’.

Deep down, the original Alfie is not really such a bad sort after all. He is not the brutal, egomaniacal, and emotionally illiterate swine that he often appears to be and that the remake shied away from presenting. In his harshest moments, his face betrays an inner struggle, and sometimes his voice does too. So why does he behave as he does? Because he thinks that one ought to be entirely self-reliant and thereby immune to being let down. ‘It don’t do to get dependent on nobody in this life’, he tells us, repeating the advice to various people. He is even concerned that the mother of his son doesn’t get ‘too attached’ to their child, or the boy ‘too attached’ to her.

Women are the biggest threat to Alfie’s sense of independence, since they are the ones that get closest to him. Much of his behaviour is designed to keep women at an emotional distance while allowing for physical intimacy, though he does occasionally let his guard down. What is more, this outlook on life means that he can only really respect people who are as keen as he is to avoid depending on anyone else. Most of the women in his life do not live up to this. So he lacks respect for them just as he lacks respect for the married man he befriends in hospital.

Not all of the women in his life seem likely to get too attached, however. So he finds that there is one woman he can respect. As the story progresses, various incidents begin to erode his insistence on his independence: among other things, it has cost him his relationship with his son and led to the traumatic outcome of his involvement with a married woman. He resolves to abandon his old ways and settle down with the one woman he really respects, but finds that she already has a newer, younger man. Which is hardly surprising, given that she prizes her independence as much as Alfie has prized his.

This is what motivates the famous question at the end of the film’s closing soliloquy: what’s it all about? In the original, this follows the thought that ‘if they ain’t got you one way, they’ve got you another’. This line is entirely absent from the soliloquy at the end of the remake. But it is crucial to understanding Alfie’s predicament in the original. He is caught between women who seem too dependent on him and women who don’t want him to get too close. He does not want the former and cannot have the relationship he wants with the latter. What is more, this dilemma is entirely his own fault. Valuing independence so highly has generated his problem. But he can’t see this, because that value is an integral part of his outlook. It is the lens through which he sees the world. He cannot see the lens itself or the distorting effect it is having on his life.
This is the tragedy of Alfie, the reason why even his apparent successes are tinged with melancholy, why the minor key is appropriate even for the jauntier variations Rollins plays. Alfie is hoist by his own petard. It is his own image of how one ought to be that prevents him from living the more fulfilling life that he clearly wants to live. This is why the one thing he hasn’t got is his peace of mind, as he points out in the soliloquy, when this is the one thing that matters most. Instead, he is filled with regrets and facing a future that looks as though it cannot be any different.

Bill Naughton, author of the original screenplay and the stage play on which it is based, has presented us with a complex of ideas in this story. The moral psychology of Alfie himself illustrates the general thought that your own values can prevent you from living a life that is good for you. It is also a cautionary tale about the perils of adopting a certain kind of macho outlook. On a social level, it presents the value of independence as an obstacle to a happy and equitable society. Alfie’s sexist quips designed to elicit blokey laughter are equally designed to confront the laughing audience with their own attitudes.

These themes are entirely absent from the remake. Instead it presents us with such rather obvious points as that you can sometimes hurt people without realising it, that if you do then they probably won’t like you very much, and that narcissism alone is unlikely to make for a satisfying life. The moral psychology of the central character is what holds the whole story together in the original film. Lacking this, the remake can only present its reworkings of various scenes as a rambling and disjointed sequence with neither plot nor purpose.

But why should this matter? Plenty of bad films are made every year. Why should this one be singled out for particular condemnation just because it presents a superficial version of a story already better told? Bad remakes, like bad cover versions, are often criticised quite vehemently by fans of the original, but we might think that such ire is misplaced. Marcel Duchamp is not guilty of vandalism for having drawn a moustache and goatee on a copy of the Mona Lisa: the original painting remains just as it was. Analogously, we might think, a bad remake cannot damage the original film, whose ongoing availability is just a matter of market forces.

What is wrong with a bad remake, however, is not any damage it is supposed to have done to the original. It is rather that the remake threatens to displace the original story from the constellation of narratives that a society tells itself and subsequently hands on. Bad remakes are not bad just for departing from the original in some way or other. They are bad for having failed to preserve the essential character of the story through the mutation. The bad remake is not a phase in the evolution of the story, but a different story altogether. In masquerading as the original story, the bad remake threatens to be taken as a phase in the evolution of the original story, and thereby threatens to kill off the original story altogether.
The remake of *Alfie* is certainly masquerading as a mutation of the original. This is not only a matter of its title and the superficial similarity of its lead character to the original *Alfie*. Many of the scenes in the remake follow the basic structure of scenes in the original. Many of the lines from the original reappear in the remake. But as these scenes and lines have all been jumbled around, and thrown together with other scenes and lines that would not fit the original narrative, they do not retain the meanings they originally had. In this regard, the later film is more like a remix than a remake: it takes some elements of the story and makes a different story out of them.

Were the story in the remake as interesting as the original story, or even more so, this might help to make it a good film but could not make it a good remake. As it happens, the remake of *Alfie* does not tell a remotely interesting tale. But even if it did, so long as this was not substantially the same story as the original film told it would not be a good remake. For a good remake preserves the story, adapting it for a different audience with a different set of cultural references. A film that retains the same story but tells it badly is also a bad remake, but this is because it is a bad film.

It is only when the original film tells a particularly interesting, insightful, or useful story that failing to preserve that story in the remake is a bad thing. For how could it be bad to replace a dull, predictable, or pointless story with another story? Even if the remake’s own story was no better than the original, abandoning that original story would not itself be a bad thing. So a bad remake, one that is bad for failing to preserve the story, is not necessarily a bad thing. But given the centrality of storytelling to the spread of ideas and their preservation over time, we should protect a good story from anything inimical to its continued retelling.

The original *Alfie* presents a subtle and sophisticated tale whose ideas we would all do well to consider. Presenting a shallow and altogether different story as though it were the same story therefore threatens to impoverish our culture: the shallow remake threatens to efface or eclipse the original story, which in this case is an elegant and carefully wrought communication of some deeply important, even if perhaps mistaken, thoughts about the way we organise our lives. Losing that would certainly be a bad thing.