

Nietzsche and the Grateful Dead: Transformation and Collective Improvisation

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An abstract of a paper submitted for consideration in either the area of Philosophy or Music.

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The concept of transformation is a central motif in Nietzsche's philosophy. In the "Prologue" to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche introduced the theme of transformation with the declaration of the *Übermensch*. As the meaning of the earth, the *Übermensch* stands in contrast to the concept of *Mensch*, who, Nietzsche claimed, "is something that shall be overcome." (P3) For Nietzsche, this process of overcoming marks a transformation in humanity from what has been identified and prescribed by an almost 2400 year culture originating with Plato to what might come next in the development of the species. One could argue that the general theme of the transformation of *Mensch* to *Übermensch* is actually evident in all of his philosophical works; it is clearly a focal point in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but it is also presupposed in his other works, serving as a context within which to situate his discussions of art, morality, the cultural malaise of modern Europe, philosophy and religion. It is true that more of Nietzsche's work is devoted explicitly to a critique of the culture and the tradition that gave rise to and supported the primacy of *Mensch* than is concerned with the actual details of not only the culture of the *Übermensch* but also the particular characteristics of the transformation process itself. He does, however, indicate how that transformation might be brought about, primarily, through an understanding the implications of the will to power and by saying yes to all that life has to offer. In his last work, the reflective *Ecco Homo*, Nietzsche considered the force of this affirmation and claimed that: "The idea of the

eternal recurrence ... is the “highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable.”

Thus, for Nietzsche, the key to transformation is the affirmation of the eternal recurrence.

Of the Grateful Dead, Bill Graham once claimed: “They are not the best at what they do; they are the only ones that do what they do.” Their style of making music was unique; no one had played music the way that they did. Each band member brought a different influence to the ensemble from folk to blues to classical to jazz, and while borrowing heavily from each of these genres, they forged a sound that expressed all of these influences simultaneously. But more than that, they extended the concept of improvisation found primarily in the music of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman by applying it to rock and roll and experimenting with not just a particular soloist improvising but with each of the musicians improvising concurrently. Their mode of improvising was neither associative nor hierarchical, the two traditionally understood modes of improvisation; instead their innovation was to play collectively. Playing this way marks a transformation in the playing of music. It also marks a transformation for the musicians themselves as well as those who listen to the music. Jerry Garcia, founding member and lead guitar player, when asked about the ethos of the band and the milieu of the 1960’s San Francisco scene described it in terms of transformation. He responded: “We would all like to live an uncluttered life, a simple life, a good life, you know. And, like, think about moving the whole human race ahead a step or a few steps, or half a step, or anything.”

In this paper, I identify the phenomenological structures of collective improvisation and offer an interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal recurrence. I then show how the transformation expressed in collective improvisation can be

understood in terms of the same affirmation of the eternal recurrence that Nietzsche's transformation from *Mensch* to *Übermensch* requires.