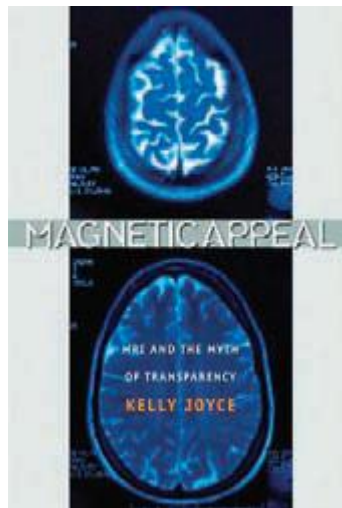


# Magnetic Appeal: MRI and the Myth of Transparency By Kelly A. Joyce; Cornell University Press



**M**agnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is revered as the most sophisticated diagnostic imaging tool

available, a sacred technology that represents progress, certainty, and quality healthcare. With its ability to render anatomical images, MRI is understood to hold the truth about the body, possess the ability to “see” illness and disease, even save lives.

But can a machine be worthy of all that?

In *Magnetic Appeal: MRI and the Myth of Transparency*, author Kelly A. Joyce makes a strong case debunking the perceived infallibility of MRI. She challenges the “seeing is believing” ethos in medicine and exposes the political economy of MRI technology. A sociologist and self-identified science and technology studies (STS) scholar, Joyce excavates the origins of MRI, from its roots in nuclear physics and numerical data to its use by radiologists and transition to gray scale images. Her research is provocative, delving beyond the nuts and bolts of the science to illuminate how mass advertising, fear of malpractice litigation, fee-for-service structures, and research funding all contribute to MRI’s status in modern medicine.

*Magnetic Appeal* is a fascinating and superbly researched book. Relying on fieldwork at imaging sites, conferences, and interviews with medical professionals, Joyce focuses on how radiologists, referring physicians, and technologists make sense of anatomical scans in clinical practice. We come to understand how the U.S. desire for scans reflects anxieties about the quality of healthcare, physician skills, and increased incidence of cancer, MS, and other chronic illnesses.

The reader is drawn into the pressure-cooker of imaging units, where radiologists and technologists are under constant demand to accelerate their work practices. Though MRI does not use a lens to take pictures of the body—the image depends upon a translation from numbers to images—MRI has become ubiquitous with the visual. The visual is transparent truth. It’s the machine, rather than trained radiologists who interpret the scans, holding the answers.

“In a symbolic economy that equates the image with certainty,” Joyce writes, “MRI is not just the right tool for the job. It is perceived as one of the few tools available.”

Yet, Joyce argues that MRI in most cases only confirms what other kinds of diagnoses already indicate.

The point is made that MRI is an important diagnostic technology, but it should not supplant other forms of medical knowledge. Nor should it distract from the reality that medicine is an uncertain practice. MRI cannot provide objectivity attributed to it, Joyce says, nor can it provide cures for disease.

*Magnetic Appeal* ultimately leads readers to question whether MRI use is out of control. One naturally wonders whether the profit incentive of MRI—both for manufacturers of the machine and clinics that own them—

somehow skews patient care. Given the seriousness of our nation's healthcare crisis, people may want to learn more about the machine. —YOMI WRONG

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