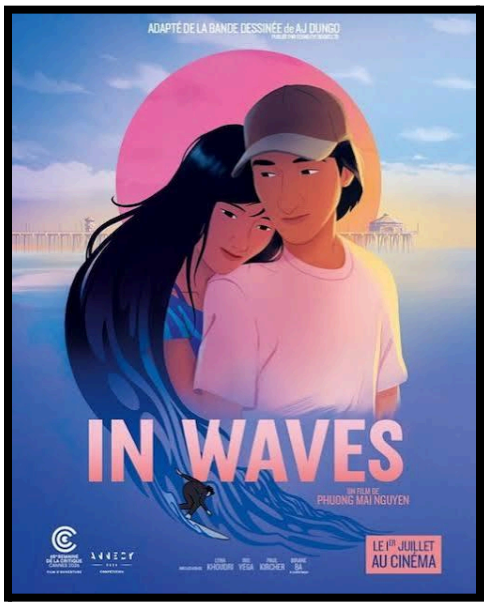
The American French Film Festival, a Week of Premieres in Hollywood
The American Association of French Teachers of Southern California

Resources Kit

In Waves (2026)
de Phuong Mai Nguyen



Activities created by Laurence Denié-Higney, UCLA (editor-in-chief), Marie-Magdeleine Chirol, Whittier College, and Roxane Lécrivain, Campbell Hall.

We thank Inès du Cos de La Hitte of Sierra Canyon School for proofreading.

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Part A1: Film Technical Information

Director	Phuong Mai Nguyen
Scenario	Fanny Burdino et Samuel Doux, an adaptation of the autobiographical graphic novel by AJ Dungo
Music	Oklou et Rob
Production	Priscilla Bertin et Judith Nora
Coproduction	Nick Shumaker
Distributed by	Netflix

Main characters:

Characters	**Actors / Actresses**
Kristen	Lyna Khoudri
AJ	Rio Vega
Eon	Paul Kircher
Francisco	Birane Ba de la Comédie Française
Jeff	Gauthier Battoue

Part A2: Before the Movie Screening

I. FRANCE AND ANIMATION

A. GOBELINS PARIS - L'EXCELLENCE À LA FRANÇAISE

Phuon Mai Nguen grew up in Vietnam until the age of 15. She studied in Paris. She later studied at the prestigious Gobelins School. She graduated in 2009 as a concept artist and animation director.

1/ Follow the link to the GOBELINS school and then decide if the sentences below are true or false.

Gobelins Paris Site in in English	True	False
1. GOBELINS Paris is a leading institution in the cultural and creative industries.		
2. This is a public university run by the French government.		
3. The school is affiliated with the Paris Île-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry.		
4. There are about 2,000 students at GOBELINS Paris.		
5. The school does not accept international students.		
6. There is no training in 'Video Games.'		
7. The school offers *scholarships.*		
Gobelins Alumni Site in English		
8. *In Waves* is the third feature film by Phuon Mai Nguen.		
9. *In Waves* was presented in Cannes et in competition in Annecy.		
10. Phuon Mai Nguen was the only alumna of GOBELINS Paris.		

B. FRENCH TOUCH IN CALIFORNIAN ANIMATION

Read the text below and then answer the questions.

“We have a unique know-how”: why French animation is the most envied in the world

Supported by high-quality education, the French animation scene is renowned the world over, from Hollywood to Japan. BFMTV’s Jérôme Lachasse investigated this French cultural exception.

22 June 2023

BFMTV‘s Jérôme Lachasse investigated this French cultural exception; here are a few selected highlights from the article, which you can read in full here.

The French animation industry has never been so popular, and its talents are in demand the world over. Last May, studio La Cachette unveiled The Spy Dancer, a Star Wars short film produced for Disney. Mikros Animation was responsible for the animation of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem (in cinemas August 2), while French animators took part in the highly-anticipated The First Slam Dunk (July 26).

Philippe Alessandri, co-producer of Mars Express, an ambitious SF thriller selected at Cannes and the Annecy Festival, shares this analysis: “Someone working at Nickelodeon told me recently that she wanted to make a film in France, because she liked the ‘franime’, the way the French have digested Japanese animation. Unlike us, Americans haven’t digested it well, it’s too American, not Japanese enough.”

“The Americans respect us a lot for our high standards,” says Philippe Alessandri. “They know our budgets, and they can’t believe we’re able to release films of this quality. Mars Express has a budget of just 8 million euros.” They also appreciate the initiatives taken: “The Mikros Animation teams have really made the Ninja Turtles look their own. That doesn’t happen very often,” notes Jeff Rowe.

“France has succeeded in combining drawing and technology,” adds Benoît Chieux, whose film Sirocco opened the Annecy Festival. “Even the Japanese have a lot of trouble taking 3D into interesting graphic territory.” “French animators are among the best in the world, because France puts a lot of emphasis on art education, and has many cultural treasures,” adds Jeff Rowe, director of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem. “They benefit from an immense cultural heritage.”

Source: https://www.mikrosanimation.com/en/news/bfmtv-why-french-animation-is-the-most-envied-in-the-world/

1. List some of the most recent productions in which French animation artists were involved:

_____

_____

_____

2. What does ‘franime’ mean?

_____

_____

_____

3. What do Americans appreciate when working with French people?

_____

_____

_____

4. What are the French animators’ strengths?

_____

_____

_____

Examples of the French touch:

Have you heard of Julien Bocabeille, Pierre Coffin or Jean-Christophe Poulain? Do you know the production house *Fortiche*? Maybe… other than being of French origins, do you know what they have in common? They all helped shape your childhood.

- Julien Bocabeille participated in the making of all the *Kung Fu Panda* movies and *Penguins of Madagascar* when he worked for ‘Dreamworks.’
- Pierre Coffin is the creator and the voice of the *Minions*.
- Jean-Christophe Poulain worked on *Frozen* et *Frozen 2* and *Zootopia*
- The production hour *Fortiche* is behind the series *Arcane*.

			
Julien Bocabeille	Pierre Coffin	Jean-Christophe Poulain	The production house *Fortiche*

Discussion:

1/ Are you surprised to find out that many French animators worked on these movies? Are you a fan of one of them?

2/ Choose one French animator and find more information on their career. You will share the information with the rest of the class.

C. PHUONG MAI NGUYEN - DIRECTOR



Phuong Mai Nguyen was born in Hô Chi Minh-City in Vietnam. She moved to Paris at the age of 15. Elle studied at Gobelins school. She worked as a graphic author, director, and animator. Her work was selected and recognized in many animation festivals.

Watch the interview of Phuong Mai Nguyen and then answer the questions: https://youtu.be/wbXPfQhOMgA?si=2T6lWYqugL0ZjN6T (the subtitles are in English).

1. How did Phuong Mai Nguyen get involved in the project ? What attracted her to the project?

_____

_____

2. What were the challenges to adapt the graphic novel into a movie ? How did she overcome these challenges ?

_____

_____

3. Which artist inspired Phuong Mai Nguyen? Why?

_____

_____

4. Why was it difficult to do a movie on surfing?

_____

_____

5. What did Phuong Mai Nguyen learn while making the movie?

_____

_____

II. SURFING IN FRANCE

Surfing came to France in the mid fifties on the Basque coast, south west of France. But the biggest wages you can ride are located in Teahupo'o, Tahiti, a French archipelago located in the Pacific Ocean. This is where the 2024 Olympic Games surfing competition took place.

Before watching the video, research about Tahiti : Why is it a French island ? Describe the culture? How important is surfing in Tahiti?

Follow this link to watch the video:https://youtu.be/60Vr0xgHwEw?si=VH0ypMDD6aojzIiV

- Describe the waves.
- List your impressions when you watch the video.
- What do you think of the surfer?



Kauli Vaast received a golden medal at the 2024 Olympic Games. Research to find more information about the French surfer. Share with your classmates what you found.

Part A3: After the Movie Screening

A. STORY AND THEMES

1/ The story:

After talking with your classmates about the different characters in the movies and the storyline, with one or two partners write the synopsis of the movie for your school newspaper.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2/ Themes:

There are many themes in this movie: love, facing challenges (fear, sickness, death of a loved one and grief), surfing, friendship, etc…). Pick one of these themes and write a paragraph explaining your choice. Use examples from the movie in your paragraph.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. THE MUSIC

Do you recall the music of the movie ? Why do you remember the music? or why don't you remember the music?

_____

_____

_____

According to you, what role does the music play in the movie?

_____

_____

_____

Watch the video with Oklou et Rob, music composers of the movie (from 1:48 to 2:58: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPe2o31aHtk). How was the process to develop the soundtrack of the movie ? How long did it take ? What helped the composers ?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

In one sentence, explain how each of the following musical elements can influence the scene.

Rhythm and Tempo:

_____

Mood of the music:

_____

Volume:

_____

Genre:

_____

C. EMOTIONAL / EXPRESSIVE COLOR

1/ Consult the episode #55 "IMAGES - Color for Emotion in Scenes" from Comic Tips (2025) (in French, 2025, Astuces BD) by Mac McCool and answer the questions.

a. What is the local color?

_____

Examples: Grass is _____, skies are _____, snow is _____

b. What are emotional colors?

_____

Examples	**Red**	**Blue**	**Yellow**
Adjectives	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____

2/ Consult the episode # 56 "IMAGES - Picking Emotional Colors." from Comic Tips (2025) (in French, 2025, Astuces BD) by Mac McCool and answer the questions.

a. What can local colors not express very well?

_____

b. In many cultures, what emotions do these colors evoke?

Colors	**Red**	**Blue**	**Yellow**
Nouns	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____

c. How bright or dark is it?

_____ (+ white) **HUE** _____ (+ black)

= _____ mood = _____ mood

_____ (+ grey) **HUE**

= _____ mood

d. Complete the author's conclusion:

Reality **+** influence **=** _____

_____ colors **+** _____ colors

3/ Choose one of the frames below. Answer the questions and mark the appropriate answer with an X where indicated.



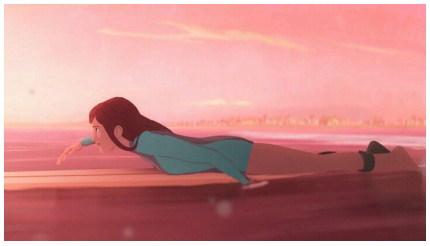
Frame 1 [21:30]



Frame 2 [31:09]



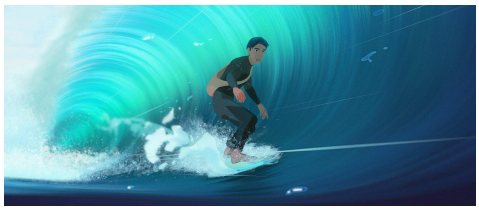
Frame 3 [32:46]



Frame 4 [47:38]



Frame 5 [50:39]



Frame 6 [1:24:54]

FRAME _____

a. Dominant colors: _____
___ warm colors (**yellow**, yellow orange, orange, red orange, red, red violet)
___ cool colors (yellow green, green, blue green, **blue**, blue violet, violet)
___ neutral colors (black and white)

b. Value (light / dark): ___ + white ___ + grey ___ + black

Mood: _____

c. What emotions do these colors evoke?

_____

_____

d. What do these colors symbolize? (Think also about when the scene takes place.)

_____

_____

Part B2: Before the Movie Screening - Corrections

I. FRANCE AND ANIMATION

A. GOBELINS PARIS - L'EXCELLENCE À LA FRANÇAISE

Phuon Mai Nguen grew up in Vietnam until the age of 15. She studied in Paris. She later studied at the prestigious Gobelins School. She graduated in 2009 as a concept artist and animation director.

1/ Follow the link to the GOBELINS school and then decide if the sentences below are true or false.

Gobelins Paris Site in English	True	False
1. GOBELINS Paris is a leading institution in the cultural and creative industries.	X	
2. This is a public university run by the French government.		X
3. The school is affiliated with the Paris Île-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry.	X	
4. There are about 2,000 students at GOBELINS Paris.		X
5. The school does not accept international students.		X
6. There is no training in 'Video Games.'		X
7. The school offers *scholarships.*	X	
Gobelins Alumni Site in English		
8. *In Waves* is the third feature film by Phuon Mai Nguen,		X
9. *In Waves* was presented in Cannes et in competition in Annecy.	X	
10. Phuon Mai Nguen was the only alumna of GOBELINS Paris.		X

B. FRENCH TOUCH IN CALIFORNIAN ANIMATION

Read the text below and then answer the questions.

1. List some of the most recent productions in which French animation artists were involved:

The Spy Dancer, a Star Wars short film produced for Disney
The animation of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem
The First Slam Dunk

2. What does 'franime' mean?

The word is a contraction of French + anime. It refers to the way the French animation world has embraced the Japanese anime and accepted its codes.

3. What do Americans appreciate when working with French people?

Americans appreciate the French high standards despite having access to lower budgets. They also like the fact that French animators take initiative when needed.

4. What are the French animators' strengths?

The French animators successfully combine drawing and technology. Art education remains important in France.

C. PHUONG MAI NGUYEN - DIRECTOR

Watch the interview of Phuong Mai Nguyen and then answer the questions:

1. How did Phuong Mai Nguyen get involved in the project ? What attracted her to the project?

Priscilla Bertin, a French producer, had the rights for the adaptation of the Graphic novel *In Waves*. Phuong Mai Nguyen liked the graphic novel and how it connected grief, life and natural elements.

2. What were the challenges to adapt the graphic novel into a movie ? How did she overcome these challenges ?

Phuong Mai Nguyen was concerned about her ability to recreate the power of the graphic novel. In order to create her animation film, she went to Los Angeles and met with AJ, Kristen's family and their friends. She took a lot of notes to better understand the characters.

3. Which artist inspired Phuong Mai Nguyen? Why?

Phuong Mai Nguyen did not use the same style as AJ Dungo. She found inspiration from David Hockney's paintings. The painter lived in Los Angeles. He used warm colors in his paintings, but the composition of his paintings show a melancholy. His choice corresponded to what she wanted to say in her animation film.

4. Why was it difficult to do a movie on surfing?

It was difficult because it is hard to reproduce water. Water is always in movement. Phuong Mai Nguyen had to think about making waves, especially because it is a movie about surfing. She had to do some research to find the right techniques to create the waves. Paul Szajner was essential in creating the waves in the movie.

5. What did Phuong Mai Nguyen learn while making the movie?

Phuong Mai Nguyen learned a lot of things: the importance of preparation, including before the making of the movie. She also had to prepare herself psychologically.

Part B3: After the Movie Screening - Corrections

A. STORY AND THEMES

1/ The story:

After talking with your classmates about the different characters in the movies and the storyline, with one or two partners write the synopsis of the movie for your school newspaper.

Answers will vary. If you have a newspaper in your school, you might want to select the best synopsis and send it to the editors.

2/ Themes:

There are many themes in this movie: love, facing challenges (fear, sickness, death of a loved one and grief), surfing, friendship. Pick one of these themes and write a paragraph explaining your choice. Use examples from the movie in your paragraph. You may or may not share it with your class.

Answers will vary. Due to the nature of the themes, students might not be comfortable with sharing their text. They could talk in pairs about the themes of the movies.

B. THE MUSIC

Do you recall the music of the movie? Why do you remember the music? or why don't you remember the music?

Answers will vary. This can be a quick think and share activity.

According to you, what role does the music play in the movie?

Answers will vary. This can be a quick think and share activity.

Watch the video with Oklou et Rob, music composers of the movie (from 1:48 to 2:58: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPe2o31aHtk). How was the process to develop the soundtrack of the movie ? How long did it take ? What helped the composers ?

The composers had access to images from the beginning. The writing took about 5 years. They used the graphic novel to get inspiration but also the moodboards created by Phuong Mai Nguyen in the studios. The colors, both vivid and soft, were a source of inspiration.

In one sentence, explain how each of the following musical elements can influence the scene.

Rhythm and Tempo: Answers will vary.

Mood of the music: Answers will vary.

Volume: Answers will vary.

Genre: Answers will vary.

Suggestion: Keep a record of the students' answers on the board to have an overview of their appreciation of the music. This could be helpful for a broader discussion on the importance of the music in the movie or in an animation film.

C. EMOTIONAL / EXPRESSIVE COLOR

1/ Consult the episode #55 "IMAGES - Color for Emotion in Scenes" from Comic Tips (2025) (in French, 2025, Astuces BD) by Mac McCool and answer the questions.

a. What is the local color?
Local color is the actual color of things, as in a photograph.

Examples: Grass is ___green_____, skies are ____blue_____, snow is ___white_____

b. Why is it better to use emotional colors rather than local colors?
"Emotional colors [...] improve the storytelling and they speak the reader's hearts."

Examples	**Red**	**Blue**	**Yellow**
Adjectives	passionate alarmed angry	serious peaceful	cheerful energetic

2/ Consult the episode # 56 "IMAGES - Picking Emotional Colors." from Comic Tips (2025) (in French, 2025, Astuces BD) by Mac McCool and answer the questions.

a. What cannot local colors express very well?
Local colors don't express emotions very well.

b. What emotions or feelings do these colors inspire in most cultures?

Colors	**Red**	**Blue**	**Yellow**
Nouns	passion alarm rage	energy cheerfulness	calm safety

c. How bright or dark is it?

_____brighter_____ (+ white) HUE _____darker_____ (+ black)

= _soft, delicate_____ mood/feeling = _____heavy, gloomy____ mood

_____ _____ (+ grey) HUE

= __duller version of a _ feeling/mood

d. Complete the author's conclusion:

Reality	+	influence	=	__overlaying mood onto reality____
Local colors	+	mood colors		

3/ Choose one of the frames below. Answer the questions and mark the appropriate answer with an X where indicated.



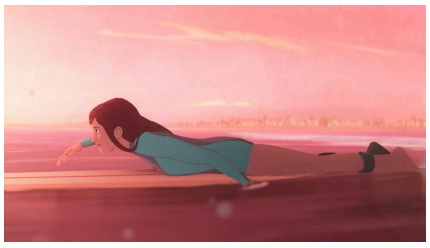
Frame 1 [21:30]



Frame 2 [31:09]



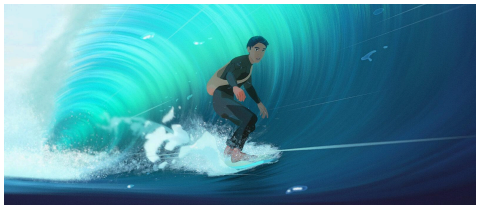
Frame 3 [32:46]



Frame 4 [47:38]



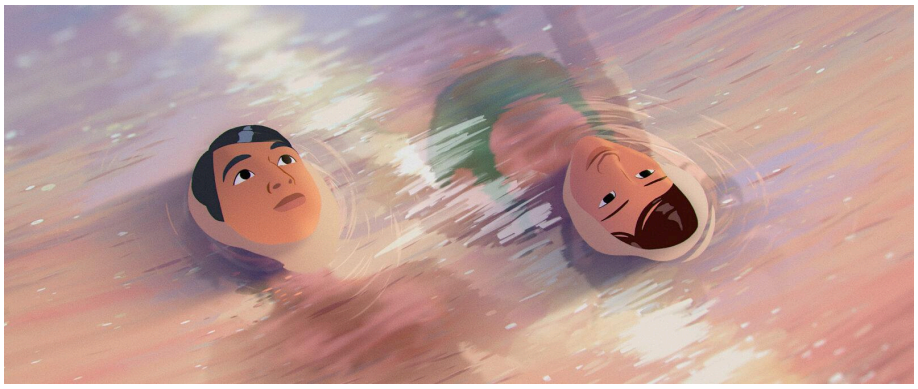
Frame 5 [50:39]



Frame 6 [1:24:54]

You may put your students in small groups or ask them to work individually.
Students may have different answers.
Below are some ideas for answering the questions about the first and last frames.

FRAME ___1_____



a. Dominant colors: _____yellow, yellow orange_____
_X_ warm colors (**yellow**, yellow orange, orange, red orange, red, red violet)
___ cool colors (yellow green, green, blue green, **blue**, blue violet, violet)
___ neutral colors (black and white)

b. Value (light / dark): _X_ + white ___ + grey ___ + black

Mood: _____soft, delicate_____

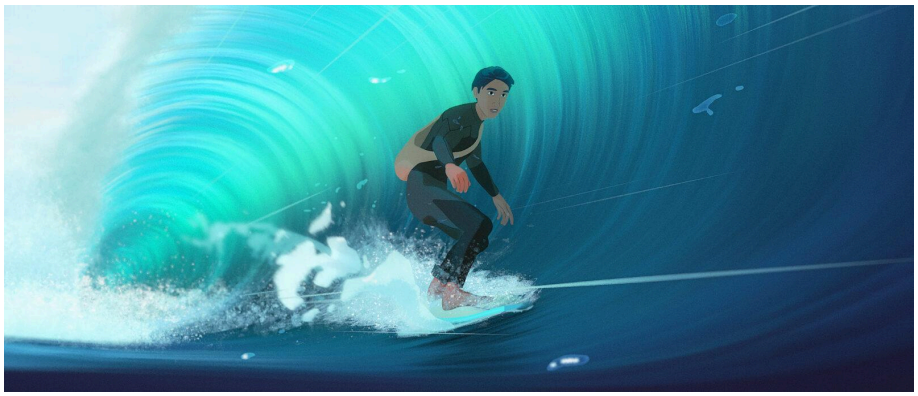
c. What emotions do these colors evoke?
The light colors and transparency of the water evoke a sense of trust and complicity (transparency) between AJ and Kristen who get to know each other. Their love begins to blossom.

d. What do these colors symbolize? (Think also about when the scene takes place.)
Everything seems clear for this young couple in love. They have their eyes open and they look at the limitless sky which, like the water, is orange yellow; there is no cloud, a plane passes by [21:25]. A simple and infinite happiness seems to await them.

AJ managed to overcome his fear of water thanks to Kristen. She helped AJ put his head in the water and do the plank on the water. He is ready to tame the waves in the next scene.

To go further: This shot contrasts with another [43:16]: AJ, in his black wetsuit, is alone in gray and opaque water. His eyes are closed; when he opens them, it's raining, the sky is dark and cloudy. Kristen is no longer of this world (we are in diegetic time, when Aj is drawing and writing his graphic novel).

FRAME ___**6**_____



a. Dominant colors: _____blue, blue green_____
___ warm colors (**yellow**, yellow orange, orange, red orange, red, red violet)
_X_ cool colors (yellow green, green, blue green, **blue**, blue violet, violet)
___ neutral colors (black and white)

b. Value (light / dark): _X_ + white ___ + grey _X_ + black

Mood: _____serious (concentrated) and peaceful_____

c. What emotions do these colors evoke?
The cool colors of the water evoke AJ's struggle to cope with Kristen's illness (cancer) and her death. They evoke effort and perseverance.

d. What do these colors symbolize? (Think also about when the scene takes place.)
AJ is inside the barrel of the wave. From one side of the frame to the other, we move from **light (white) to dark (black)**, symbolizing the **theme of transition**. The barrel, in **shades of green and blue,** represents the culmination of AJ's **long journey** to help Kristen heal. It also evokes AJ's journey towards learning to live without Kristen.

Indeed, this frame, at the end of the film, is accompanied by AJ's voiceover [in the original French version of the animation] [1:24:13]: "After Kristen died, I spent a lot of time on my own. My family and friends would ask how I was. I didn't know what to say. Eventually, I found the words I was looking for: Grief comes in waves, like a storm, from deep in the ocean, you can't stop it. So in the meantime, you just got to ride the wave." [1:24:32]

To go further: This frame echoes another gliding frame earlier in the movie. When AJ and Jeff meet up with a female friend to skateboard in a storm drain [36:25], she trains against the walls of a tunnel that extends the drain, while AJ and Jeff stand silhouetted against the light at one end.

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