Crib Sheet: Shot by Shot and Psychological Realism

A scene can be broken down into small elements and each element shot as a specific set up. This is shot by shot blocking, which has its merits and its problems:

Shot by Shot can work well because: This blocking technique produces very carefully crafted shots that can be dynamic and dramatic when edited together. Shot by shot matches the predominant contemporary style and taste for fast action with a lot of cuts per scene. Shot by shot allows set ups to be designed for special FX on set such as dangerous stunts or events; explosions, crashes, injuries, etc. and for S/FX in post-production such as CGI. These features make shot by shot the chosen option for contemporary actions scene and for scenes where the information is primarily visual, such as adverts.

Shot by shot is a failure when: Set ups do not match because of poor continuity and so they will not edit together. The performance of the actors is broken up by the demands of shot by shot so that they cannot play their scene effectively and their performance is damaged; stilted, artificial and lacking dramatic credibility.

To successfully shoot shot by shot: You need a good understanding of all aspects of continuity. You need to use shot by shot on suitable scenes. You need to spend the time planning your set ups for shot by shot by making storyboards and shot lists to ensure continuity. You need the necessary time in production to be able to shoot all the set ups you have planned. You need to ensure that actors are not worn out by multiple takes and their performance is not undermined by the demands of shot by shot. You need to ensure that sound FX and wild tracks are available when editing shot by shot material so that continuity of sound is maintained.

Psychological Realism
Psychological realism is a very special type of shot by shot blocking that gives the audience the impression that they are directly experiencing what a character in the scene is thinking or feeling. The steps to achieve this are very specific:

During the course of a scene the editing moves to a close up of a character in order to establish that the next shot will show their point of view. At this moment the sound of the scene shifts and establishes a sound that matches through the manipulation of diegetic sound and sometimes expressive music the emotions and feelings of the character. The audience will be keyed into this moment to some extent by what is already happening in the scene. The point of view shot will then make use of some sort of camera or lighting technique; slow motion, shaking, craning, tracking, flickering etc.. that creates a visual sensation that emphasises how the character is experiencing this moment in the scene. The audience take their visual experience of this shot to match the emotional experience of the character in the scene. The point of view shot will then be followed by a shot of the character where the audience will see the character in a shot using a camera technique; slow motion, shaking, craning, tracking, flickering etc.. that reinforces the audience's connection of the emotional effect of the shot to the inner perception of the character. To move back from the psychological realism to an objective view of the scene, a shot will show another element of the story and re-establish 'natural' sound.

The simplest example of shooting psychological realism might well be that of a person on a roller coaster ride and use the following sequence of set ups: Establishing shot of roller coaster travelling at speed. Close up on a character on the roller coaster; The sound of the roller coaster is very much louder than in the establishing shot, there is also a scream. The point of view shot shows a rushing, frantically shaking shot of the roller coaster travelling down a ferocious drop. The next shot cuts to a frantically shaking shot of the character in the roller coaster with a roar of sound mixed in with the sound of roller coaster itself. A long shot of the roller coaster shows the ride going round its circuit and 'natural' sound returns.